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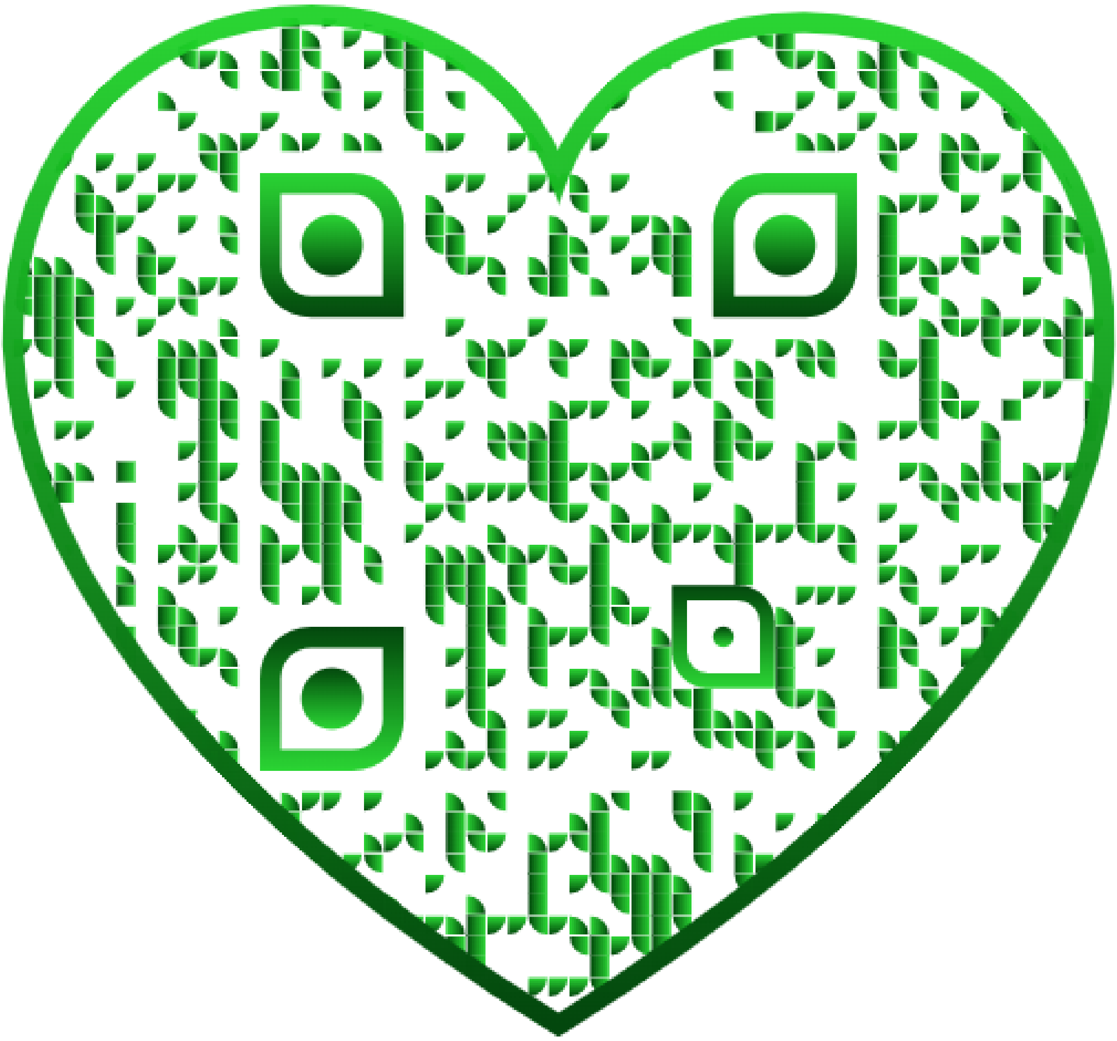

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Welcome

Cars are hard to beat at getting you to new places

Sometimes the universe gives you a nudge, and before you know it you've spent hours rummaging through piles of old magazines in your attic, pausing to read something, which sends you off in a different direction to read something else, and then you're late for your flu jab.

In his column last month Gavin Green, reminiscing about his time working with the late Ian Fraser, mentioned *TRUCK* magazine, for a while part of the *CAR* family. I used to buy it, not because I have any interest in articulated transportation, but because Phil Llewellin often wrote for it.

And then along came Ben Miller's big feature in this issue, where he uses a Vauxhall Frontera Electric to take him on a walking and climbing adventure in Scotland and Shetland. And his mention of Muckle Flugga sent me off into another Llewellin-related reverie, as his book of travel stories, many of them based on work that first appeared in *CAR* and *TRUCK*, was called *The Road to Muckle Flugga*, the title coming from a story about a Shetland drive in a Ford Maverick, the Frontera of its time.

Llewellin died 20 years ago, but is still mentioned among a handful of writers revered by long-time subscribers. Those people – the likes of Russell Bulgin, LJK Setright and George Bishop, all no longer with us – had big personalities and huge talent, and they were in demand among magazine and newspaper editors beyond *CAR*. That's all true of Phil Llewellin, but he was different, in that he was never really a road tester, more a travel writer. He was interested in cars, but chiefly as a means to get to places he'd never been before.

That spirit is echoed in Ben's story this month. The Frontera doesn't bring the thrills, but it does a very good job of providing fuss-free and cosy transport. It's a reminder, should one be necessary, that cars are hard to beat at getting you to new places – carrying your bags, serving as mobile canteens when required, and for sleeping in if all else fails.

Llewellin's *CAR* stuff was all good – and some of it quite exceptional – but to my mind the *TRUCK* stuff was even better. When he wasn't driving, he had more time to look around and to chat with the drivers, generally hardened long-haul truckers introducting him to extreme environments a long way from his beloved Wales.

What's easily overlooked is that for a few years he was also a columnist, and he was great at that too. Less big-bang than his travel features, but always engrossing. Like all the best columnists, you couldn't guess what he was going to say, but you knew you'd like the way he said it.

As well as republishing familiar material, *The Road to Muckle Flugga* includes a story not previously available. It's a 1988 piece, but the world has changed so much that it might as well be from the Middle Ages. It concerns a trip Llewellin took to China with Citroën, in a group that also included a pre-telly Jeremy Clarkson.

Llewellin mentions in passing that being invited to China happens about as often for a car journalist in 1988 as opportunities to try a new car in Chad or Siberia, and noted that China then had 300,000 registered cars, most of them taxis or limos. As I write this, 37 years on, the *CAR* team are currently juggling three invitations to China this autumn alone. And there are somewhere in the region of 340,000,000 vehicles in China. What would the great man have made of today's China? Something well worth reading, that's for sure.

Enjoy the issue (and any old issues lurking in your attic, too).

Colin Overland
Production editor

CAR Print+ subscription

Enjoy our back issues

Got an appetite for more Porsches? Our 911 at 60 celebration was in the December 2023 issue, via the Archive tab in the app.

Watch the videos

Ben Barry has his say on Cayman vs M2 in the magazine; James Dennison helms the video, in our app and on YouTube.

Read our great stories first

The way to read aventure stories like our Vauxhall Frontera trip before anyone else? By getting the app in a *CAR* Print+ subscription.

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We celebrate some of the greatest Porsches ever to wear a Turbo badge

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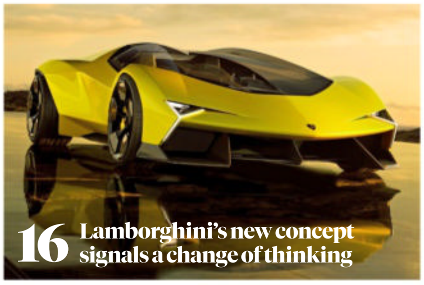
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Agenda

He might get a lot less than a trillion, but the deal should give Elon what he really wants: control

MUSK'S PAY DEAL

Who – or what – could follow Elon at Tesla?

Ben Oliver Contributing editor

▶ **Is Elon Musk really worth** a trillion-dollar pay deal? And what would Tesla look like without him? He's been threatening to reduce his stake or even quit altogether unless he can increase his shareholding to at least a quarter, the level at which he believes he can fend off a takeover bid, or activist investors who might divert or dilute his dictatorial vision for the company.

In response, Tesla chair Robyn Denholm has proposed a trillion-dollar pay package. 'Retaining and incentivising Elon is fundamental to Tesla becoming the most valuable company in history,' she wrote to investors.

She's not wrong. Tesla's forward price-earnings ratio is a good indicator of the Elon effect. For comparison, GM's market value is around six times its expected earnings for next year. Tech firms that are expected to do exciting things have higher price-earnings ratios: chip maker Nvidia, which powers the AI revolution and was briefly the world's most valuable company, trades at around 30 times its earnings.

Tesla, however, currently trades at a frankly ludicrous 170 times its earnings. Its car sales provide all of those earnings but are only a small part of that future value calculation. The fact that sales and profits have dropped just doesn't figure. Nor does the fact Elon's politics are alienating significant numbers of buyers.

Robots and other non-automotive projects give Musk his huge value

Instead, that wild price/earnings ratio is based on Tesla's future robots, robotaxis and AI: what Elon will do next, rather than what he already did. Tesla pays well and has good people, but if the main man goes, the bubble bursts and the share price crashes. His presence and confidence remain everything. Tesla's value leapt 3.5 per cent when he bought a billion dollars' worth of shares recently – just a thousandth of its value. If he dumped his shares, the stock would tank utterly.

The public optics of a potential trillion-dollar pay deal aren't great, but it makes more sense when you get into the details and understand the motivations. The full trillion is only triggered if Musk hits a series of insane-sounding targets: chiefly increasing Tesla's market capitalisation eight-fold to $8.5tn and increasing its adjusted earnings 24-fold to $400bn, but also a bunch of other, equally punchy ambitions on car and robot sales, autonomous driving subscriptions and vehicles operating on the Robotaxi network.

None of that headline sum is paid in cash: Elon will take no salary or bonus. He will be paid purely in equity, the trillion dollars being the value of the additional 12 per cent of Tesla he will receive if the company is actually worth that $8.5bn in 10 years. The shares will be released in 12 stages, so he doesn't have to wait 10 years and risk falling short of the ultimate target, but the first stage isn't activated until he has doubled Tesla's value to $2tn.

He might get a lot less than a trillion, and he might get nothing at all, but the deal should give Elon what he really wants: not cash, but control. He could end up with between 25 and 32 per cent of Tesla, depending on tax and dilution. And the majority of shareholders will want this deal too. Their options are either to lock in the man who has made them so much money already, or risk losing him and seeing the value of their shares plummet.

Denholm's pay deal for Musk also cleverly supports that share price by showing how Tesla plans to get to the crazy future valuation that investors assign it. Elon's last deal was also thought to be impossible, requiring him to increase Tesla's value from $59bn to over $600bn. But he smashed it, netting him $56bn in stock, the largest pay deal in history. You can't view growth in abstract terms unrelated to real-world factors such as market size, but under the old deal Elon produced more market-cap growth in less time than the new deal requires.

Despite being twice ratified by a large majority of Tesla shareholders, that previous deal was struck down by the courts after a lawsuit by one shareholder who disagreed: the firm's appeal began on 15 October. The new deal requires simple majority approval at Tesla's AGM in Austin on 6 November: it will be carried, but risks similar subsequent legal challenge.

It's still possible that Elon may flounce out if the pay deals are blocked or challenged: his most significant disincentive to doing so is the catastrophic effect it ▶

The faithful still treat Musk as rock star and saviour

Product line-up has stalled in recent years. Is Musk the blocker?

would have on the value of his current stake. Although it's unlikely, it's interesting to game-out what might happen if he were to quit. The share price would crash, Tesla would be valued more like a conventional car company – rather than a company that makes cars as well as energy storage products, solar energy generation products, and so on – and it would probably start to act accordingly.

A new CEO would fix the core car making business which Elon seems to have become bored by and forgotten. The first step would be to start replacement programmes for Tesla's ageing line-up and plug the obvious holes, such as an SUV and the $25k 'Model 2' which Elon canned.

It was hoped that the Model 2, perhaps based on the Cybercab, would provide an entry point into Tesla ownership for first-time buyers unmoved by – or unable to afford – the Model 3. The competition at the more affordable end of the market has expanded hugely, with keenly priced offerings from Japan, Korea, Europe and China all snapping up buyers who could have been Tesla's. Instead of a Model 2, Tesla has unveiled decontented lower-priced versions of the Model 3 and Model Y in some markets, to a largely unimpressed reception.

That new CEO could well be JB Straubel, the ex-CTO who has returned to Tesla's board, or any of the many senior staff who fell out with Elon or preferred to work in a slightly less intense environment and are now helping Tesla's rivals. That process has accelerated recently, and most seem not to have been replaced. Daniel Ho, the director of vehicle programmes, went to Waymo last year. Battery boss Vineet Mehta left this year, as did powertrain chief Drew Baglino. Milan Kovac and Ashish Kumar, who led the robotics and AI on Optimus (the robot) respectively, also quit, the latter joining Meta. Rebecca Tinucci, in charge of the charger network, left for Uber.

Elon's last pay deal was also thought to be impossibly ambitious – but he got it

The clear-out has further concentrated Elon's influence over Tesla's daily operations. It would make the share price correction all the more painful if he were to quit. But a flat hierarchy and some easy wins might tempt back one of the really senior ex-Tesla people who have gone to major rivals, such as Doug Field, now the chief EV, digital and design officer at Ford, or Sterling Anderson, who joined GM as chief product officer earlier this year and is tipped to replace Mary Barra as CEO, when she eventually retires.

Tesla under anyone other than Elon probably wouldn't produce the armies of humanoid robots its investors hope it might, but it could produce a better, more complete range of EVs that would take the fight to Chinese rivals like BYD. And there's a chance – just a chance – that we might get to witness that.

WORLD ENDURANCE

That's the end of Porsche at Le Mans (for now)

Gary Watkins Endurance expert

▶ **Many manufacturers could withdraw from** the top flight of sportscar racing, the World Endurance Championship, and the world wouldn't bat an eyelid. But Porsche? The marque with the most overall wins at the Le Mans 24 hours? The one with a consistent presence in long-distance competition stretching back more than 70 years, and a long line of iconic machinery that has become legend? That's a big deal.

Its decision to quit the Hypercar division is a seismic one for the WEC – not just because it's leaving, but because of the reasons it's chosen to leave.

Porsche needs to save money on motorsport in the face of falling sales and profits. One of its three factory programmes had to go. The casualty was never going to be its attack on the 2025-2026 Formula E championship, which kicks off in December. So that meant one of its campaigns with the 963 LMDh hybrid run by Porsche Penske Motorsport, either in the WEC or the IMSA SportsCar Championship in the USA, faced the chop.

The fact that North America is Porsche's largest market was important in IMSA getting the nod over the WEC. But Porsche has been open about the part played in the decision by sporting considerations. Put simply, it feels that in IMSA there's a level playing field, whereas there isn't in the world championship. That made the WEC programme a sitting duck.

If you can't beat 'em, quit. But Porsche is still in IMSA

'The financial aspect is there and also the sporting aspect,' says Thomas Laudenbach, boss of Porsche Motorsport. 'The original idea was, you can build one car and you can race in both championships on a level playing field. It didn't work out everywhere the same. This had an influence on our decision.'

Porsche won the WEC drivers' title last year with Kevin Estre, Laurens Vanthoor and Andre Lotterer; the first two will go into the 2025 finale in Bahrain on November 8 with an outside chance of retaining it. But what Porsche hasn't done in three years with the 963 is win Le Mans. Yet in the USA equivalent at Daytona it's been dominant.

The failure to win at Le Mans this year clearly hurt. It finished second with Estre, Vanthoor and Matt Campbell in the #6 PPM entry, behind the Ferrari 499P. But it wasn't truly in the fight. The Balance of Performance (BoP) formula, which adjusts weight and power to level the playing field, didn't give it much of a chance. BoP is meant to ensure the cars are all equally fast, and that who wins is determined by driver skill, strategy and reliability. On all those criteria the Porsche came out ahead of the Ferrari – and yet the Ferrari won.

'It hurt because the #6 car had close to a perfect race,' says Laudenbach (not using the BoP acronym for fear of sanction; WEC participants are expressly forbidden from talking about it). 'The #6 should have won the race.'

He suggests there are 'things to improve' in the WEC – a call for it to put its house in order. There are more manufacturers coming; Genesis next year, then Ford and McLaren the season after. But Porsche's withdrawal remains a worry.

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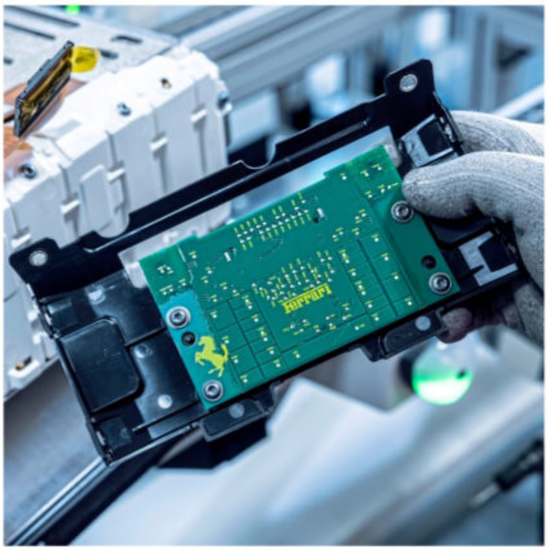
TECHNOLOGY

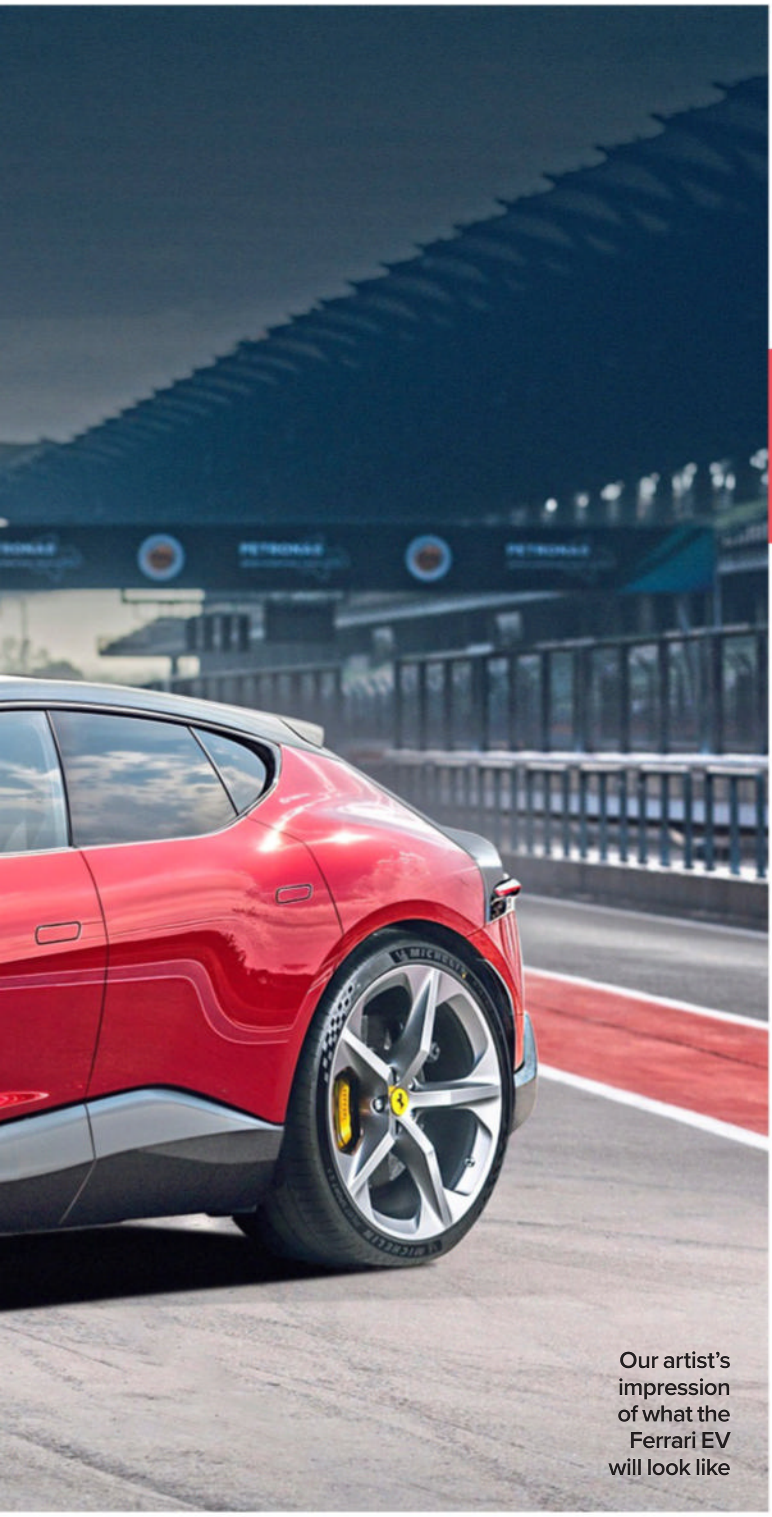
It's the cleverest car ever built. But who will buy Ferrari's EV?

Ben Miller Editor

Illustration: Avarvarii



It's mostly Ferrari's own work, aside from cells supplied by SK On



Our artist's impression of what the Ferrari EV will look like

▶ **Just occasionally, Maranello** gets things wrong. Ditching the physical engine start button on its steering wheels was one such misstep. The touch control that replaced it lacked any tactility or theatre. We didn't like it and nor did customers. And Ferrari has U-turned.

'In the past, we introduced a touch sensor on our steering wheel,' sweated Ernesto Lasalandra, chief research and development officer, under the lights at Ferrari's investor day in October. 'Based on the feedback of our clients, we understood that this technology did not provide them with added value, and we have decided to come back to a physical one. All new cars in production will have a physical one, and we will also make it available to clients of past models.'

There was further evidence that, more so now than ever, predicting what people want and when they'll want it is harder than a heat-treated crankshaft. Back in 2022, Ferrari predicted EVs would account for nearly half its sales by 2030, with a projected split of 40 per cent EV, 40 per cent hybrid and 20 per cent combustion engines. But things change. CEO Benedetto Vigna announced a revised split: 20 per cent EV, 40 per cent hybrid and 40 per cent combustion engines. On the same day, Ferrari also went public with details of its first EV – and its stock posted its worst day's trading ever.

The sharp drop was much more about guidance that fell short of expectations than a response to either the powertrain split adjustment or the Elettrica's technical details (not its final name). But given the likes of Rimac and Lotus have both blazed unsuccessful all-electric performance trails (there's a good reason the next Bugatti, the brainchild of Rimac founder Mate Rimac, isn't all-electric) and an EV from the likes of Lamborghini is years away, you have to wonder why Ferrari's persevering – and who it thinks will buy the first Ferrari without an engine.

The Elettrica is not a supercar; we knew this. Chief product development officer Gianmaria Fulgenzi is adamant current cell chemistry can't deliver a big enough performance advantage to offset the weight increase. So the electric Ferrari will be a four-door GT rather than ▶

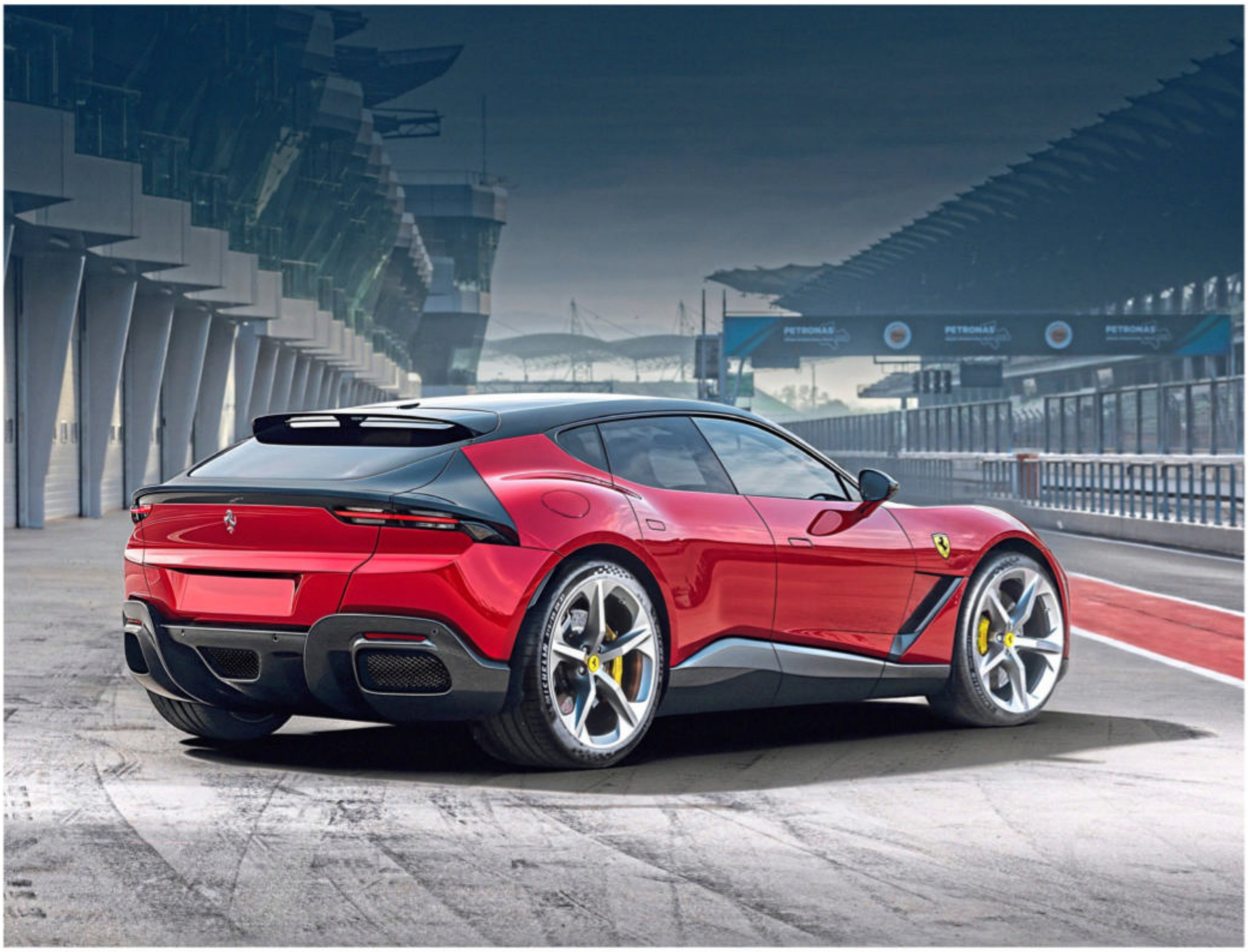


Illustration: Avarvarii

an engine-less 296 GTB. It uses four electric motors, two on each axle. Total output is more than 1000bhp. The rear axle is good for 831bhp, and the front axle 282bhp. Performance? Less than 2.5sec 0-62mph, a top speed of 193mph and a claimed range of more than 330 miles. At 122kWh (gross) and 2300kg, the Ferrari combines one of the biggest batteries yet seen in an EV with a competitive weight figure some 300kg lighter than the similarly powerful Porsche Cayenne Electric Turbo.

The battery unit has been developed by Ferrari and final assembly takes place at Maranello, but the cells themselves are by SK On, a South Korean firm with which Ferrari's collaborated for years on its hybrids.

Specific outputs for the drive units – 4.3bhp per kg at the front and 6.4bhp per kg at the rear – are juicy. Heat is dealt with not via direct oil cooling of the stator, as Porsche is doing, but with a high-thermal-conductivity resin, vacuum-impregnated into the stator to move heat efficiently out of the motors and into the liquid-cooling system. It's claimed the resin also boosts mechanical strength; an important consideration given the centrifugal forces involved. To which end, the motors also feature 1.6mm-thick carbon sleeves that press-fit into the rotors and safeguard the individual magnets from the enormous forces they're subjected to at peak revs.

Between them, the four motors represent a sandbox of dynamic opportunities for Ferrari's engineers. And it's this, together with the Elettrica's fully active suspension and independent rear-wheel steering, that qualifies it as one of the most sophisticated cars ever built – one with more dominion over the laws of physics than anything we've seen before.

The EV should do well in China, where imported cars with big engines are heavily taxed

But what of the theatre of a true Ferrari? The spine-tingling noise and thrill of working up and down a gearbox, either with a ball-topped shift lever in an open gate or with paddles? Well, the Elettrica's attempting to give you that, too, with shift paddles and a 'gearbox' – or at least a set of five pre-determined levels of torque between which you can shift via the paddles.

And there'll be noise – when you want it. An accelerometer mounted on the rear motor casing, which vibrates at different frequencies depending on speed and load, will feed this to the cabin as noise. A cancellation system will weed out the unpleasant frequencies and bring the nice ones up in the mix. It's not fake noise. But neither is it pure or analogue, like exhaust or inlet. Ferrari uses an electric-guitar analogy; the sound comes from an authentic source, but the noise is amplified electronically, not naturally by the body of the guitar.

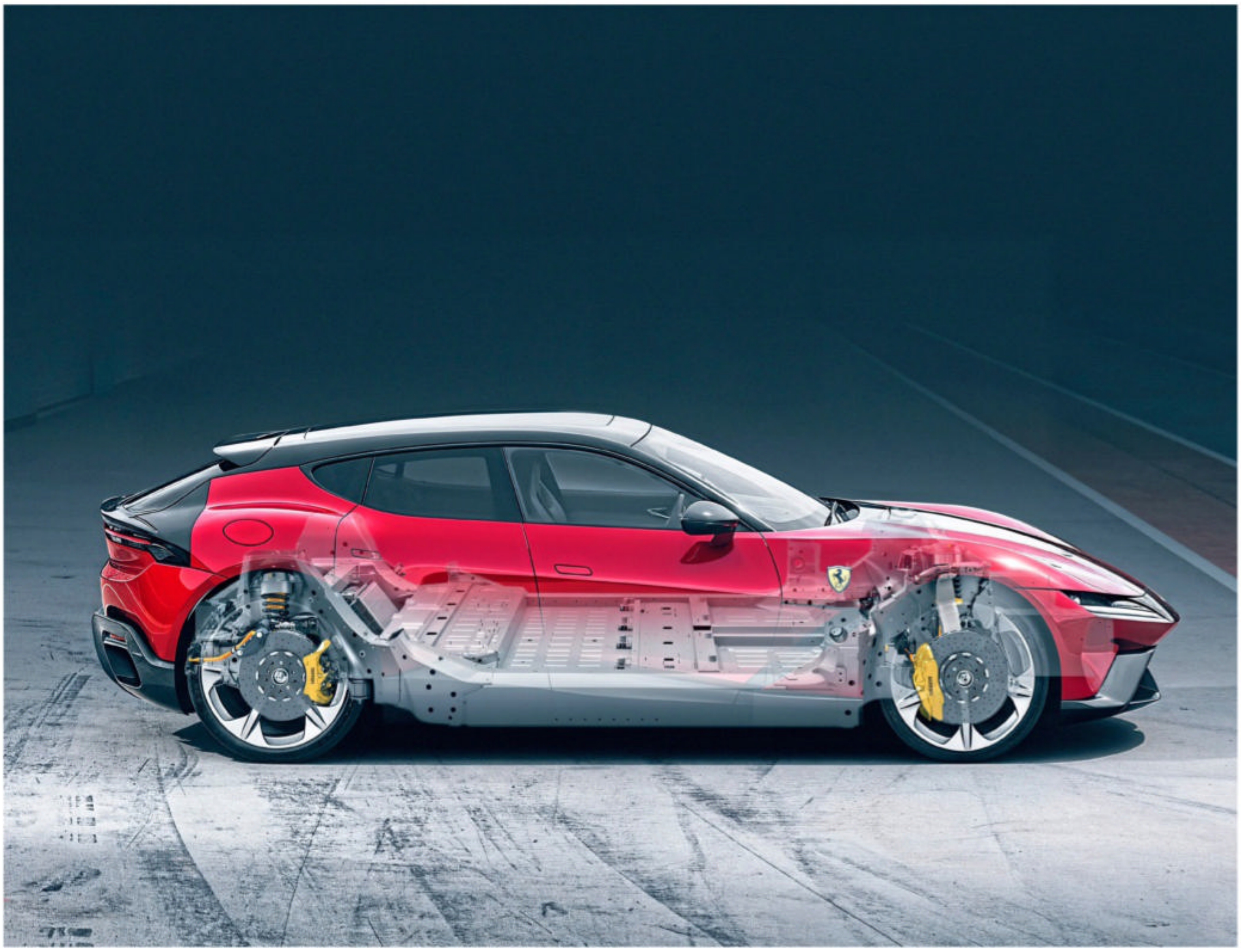


Illustration: Avarvarii

Battery under the floor, electric motor at each corner

Methodically, then, Ferrari has worked to address all the issues that make the phrase 'electric Ferrari' feel more than a touch oxymoronic. But who will buy the Elettrica?

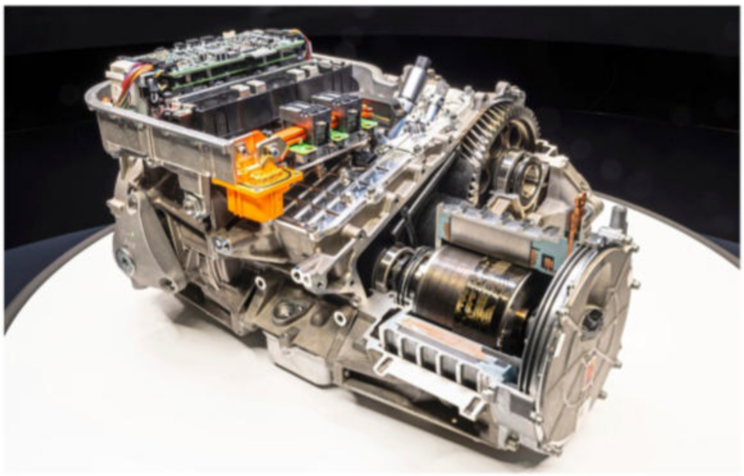
CEO Vigna is adamant Ferrari won't bully clients into buying the EV. 'We won't push the Elettrica to our current clients – we won't say, "If you don't take the Elettrica, then you will not be a special client any more." It is their choice. For the electric car we must target the clients that are already passionate about this kind of powertrain.'

To that unknown number of positively-charged Ferraristi we can add completists, of which there are many. Since 2022, Ferrari's managed to increase the average number of its cars in clients' collections by 22 per cent, and 45 per cent of those collectors are new to the brand. You'd also imagine there will be Elettrica customers looking to become 'special clients' in the hope of being offered exclusive models, even if Ferrari isn't going to actively push the EV on them. And while Ferrari management is loath to specify regions or demographics, the EV should do well in China, where imported cars with big engines and hefty prices are hit with a barrage of taxes – and where EV acceptance and understanding is among the highest in the world.

But there's no doubt the electric future looks less certain than it did when Maranello's EV was green lit, as Vigna cedes. 'We understand it is important to increase the number of combustion-engined models and to limit a little bit the number of electric models. This is very fine. We are an agile company. In just a few years we have seen how the world is changing.'

Vigna also confirmed Ferrari's commitment to its engine line-up, which includes a twin-turbo V6, a twin-turbo V8 and the big V12. The company – which sells just over 13,000 cars a year in over 60 countries – will continue to develop these technologies, increasing specific outputs up to 2030 and beyond, while also being ready for e-fuels, should their use become anything like widespread.

Against that backdrop the Elettrica – a futuristic tour de force in so many ways – looks a little like the product of a different time.



The secret to 100 years of keeping zillionaires happy

Colin Overland Production editor

▶ **What do you see when** you look at a line-up of every generation of Rolls-Royce Phantom, a car that debuted 100 years ago? They're all big, and upright, and clearly expensive. No dispute there. But Rolls-Royce design chief Domagoj Dukec says the key to understanding the success of the Goodwood-based luxury car maker is to look not at the similarities but at the differences.

Because every one of the eight generations has involved significant steps forward, in response to both the demands of the company's wealthy customers and the availability of new technology, from the Mk3's V12 engine to the latest Mk8's advanced connectivity.

Dukec insists the aim must not be to create an icon or feed the legend, but to design a great car, one that exceeds the expectations of buyers. He says: 'You must understand what the client wants, what they can't get anywhere else. Don't keep giving people more of the same, even if that's what they think they want. Give them better. Use the technology. Read the client's mind. Know what they will like before they even think of it.'

Rolls-Royce's clients want 'a very authentic experience'; they want everything 'in its purest form'.

Dukec encourages his team to always be thinking about what founders Charles Rolls and Henry Royce would do. 'If they were here today, they wouldn't necessarily be wanting to turn the clock back.' They were always pushing forward, using the best and newest ideas. 'In fact they were questioning everything.'

Rolls has just revealed a limited run of 25 centenary-edition Phantoms, all sold already. From the outside, it looks like a current Phantom with a striking black and white paint scheme and a head-spinning wheel design.

But inside it couldn't be more different. The seats, doors and roof lining are all adorned with elaborately embroidered and laser-etched representations of places significant in the Phantom's century. The rear seats show a scene depicting Rolls-Royce's HQ in Conduit Street, Mayfair, in 1913. There are also various coastlines, animals, roads and other squiggles, some of them baffling Easter eggs for the owners to decode in the years and decades ahead.

The interior has also involved using craft techniques never previously employed at Rolls-Royce, such as 24-carat gilding and 3D marquetry. Bespoke design manager Matt Danton says: 'This started three and a half years ago with a blank sheet of paper. Before any pen touched paper we did a lot of research, working with our historians and the archives. We found some incredible stories we didn't know, and characters within the brand.'

At the time of the first Phantom's creation, Henry Royce was the driving force, at the peak of his powers, said Danton. 'His cars had a strong sense of location, and we've tried to reflect where they were built. We started to embellish and build on those stories, turning stories into visuals, and came up with a master artwork. It's like a time capsule, travelling through 100 years and capturing bits of the story on the way.'

Bold on the outside; bonkers on the inside

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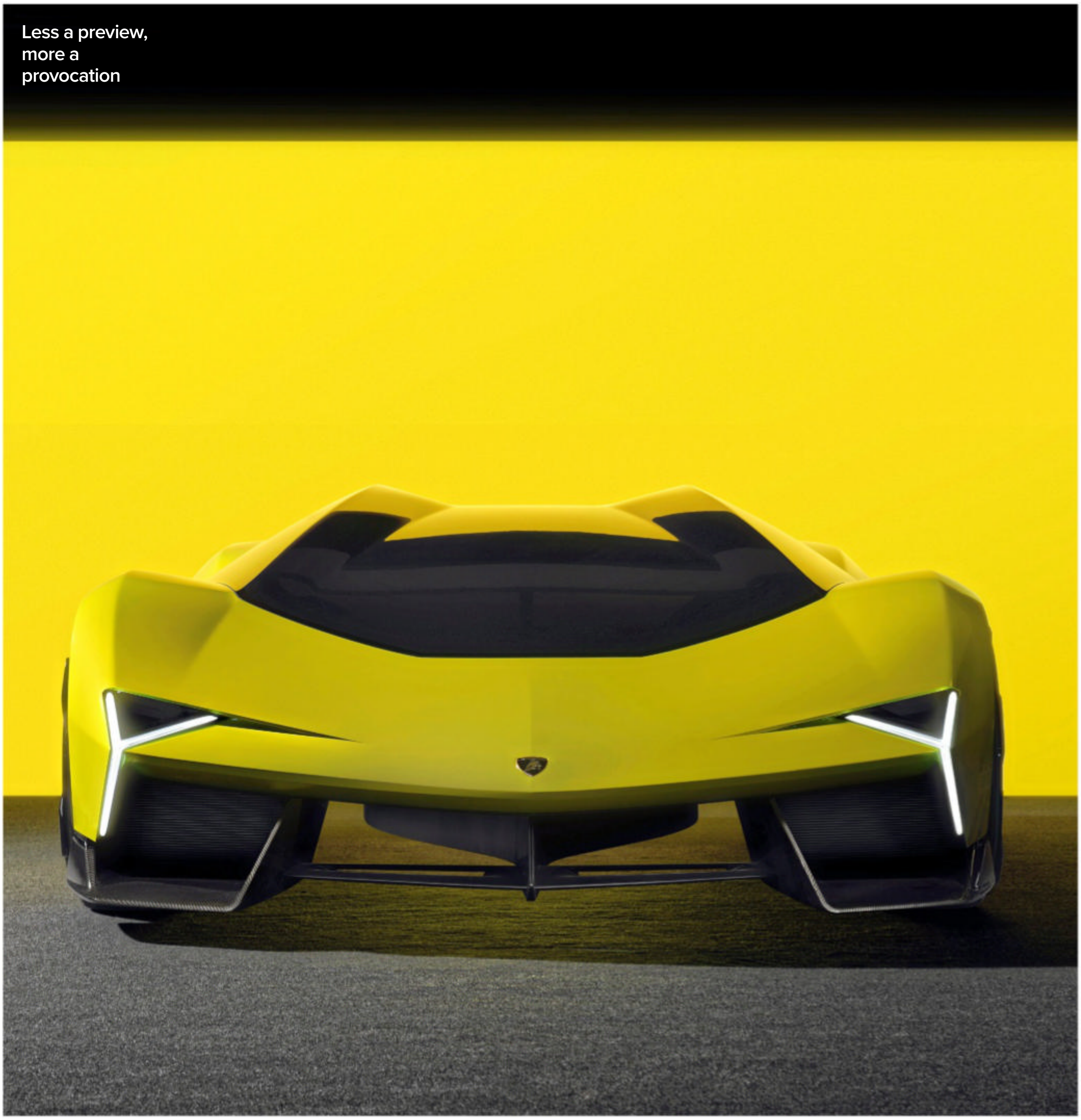


Less a preview, more a provocation

DESIGN

Lamborghini minus the bling

Georg Kacher European editor

▶ **Enough. That's enough bling, enough** flamboyant aero, and enough of the ornamental fripperies that can all too easily distract from the seriously good engineering at the heart of Lamborghini.

Instead, meet the Manifesto concept. Its name is not random – this is less a preview of future models, more a statement about what Lamborghini stands for.

Its debut comes at the 20th birthday party of Centro Stile, founded in 2005 by Walter de'Silva when he was head of design at the now-defunct grouping of Audi, Seat and Lamborghini within the VW family.

It's now Lamborghini's chief creative hub, and a significant profit centre in its own right, because this is where the highly lucrative one-offs and limited editions take shape. It's also home to the Ad Personam

Lamborghini has got into the habit of attracting attention with a mix of wings, spats, ducts, flares, aprons, splitters and diffusers

customisation studio, which makes customers' colour and trim dreams come true. Tucked away in a grey cube inside the Sant'Agata factory, Centro Stile accommodates 26 modellers and designers, working closely with R&D next door but in safe isolation from the Audi mother brand and the controllers of the VW Group.

For the 20th anniversary, de'Silva is here along with various other luminaries, including former board members Manfred Fitzgerald and Maurizio Reggiani, the CAD pioneer Fillipo Perini, Maserati's Klaus Busse, and Michael Leiters of Porsche, Ferrari and McLaren fame.

Now running his own consultancy, one of de'Silva's many smart moves in his time within the VW empire was appointing former Porsche designer Mitja Borkert as Lamborghini design chief.

At the anniversary bash, Borkert says: 'We constantly refine and modify our brand book. It contains the full set of criteria which define the DNA of Lamborghini. Among them are signature elements like the recurrent hexagon pattern and the Y-shaped light graphics. Our mission is to create emotional and totally unique products which can be instantly identified from all angles.'

Lamborghini has got into the habit of attracting the attention of wealthy buyers with a cocktail of garish colours, dramatic proportions, riveting presence, eye-catching details and a full set of wings, spats, ducts, flares, aprons, splitters and diffusers. But that will become less predominant.

'Our design, which used to be quite mono-thematic, now spans a fairly broad spectrum,' admits CEO Stephan Winkelmann. 'Collectors who buy low-volume limited-edition supercars obviously appreciate the massive visual impact extreme shapes have on road and track. But with the Urus, we opened up the brand to more mainstream customers, who typically prefer a less extrovert outfit.

'Although eye-catching colours are popular across the entire range, an overly aggressive stance or compromised packaging are best avoided. Instead, we are now beginning to move step by step towards a cleaner, purer and somewhat more laid-back look. Point in case is the Manifesto, which fuses the essential with the iconic by emphasising purity and presence over impact and effect.'

The Manifesto will influence the next two major projects: the restyled Urus, which is still almost five years away, and the fourth model, as previewed by the Lanzador concept in 2023. Since the previously envisaged fully electric SSP61 donor platform, which was to be developed by Porsche, has been postponed indefinitely, the fourth model will almost certainly use the familiar MSB architecture, as will the facelifted Porsche Panamera and the next Bentley Continental. What kind of vehicle can we expect, and how will it be positioned? Today, no one is saying, or at least not on the record.

The grapevine is now predicting an elegant and sporty front-engined two-door GT powered by an 800bhp-plus evolution of the freshly hybridised V8, wrapped up in super-clean Manifesto surfaces. Sources say it could come to market in late 2029, priced at around £240k. That's not as fast as Chinese car makers, but the aim is to cut development times from over five to under four years.

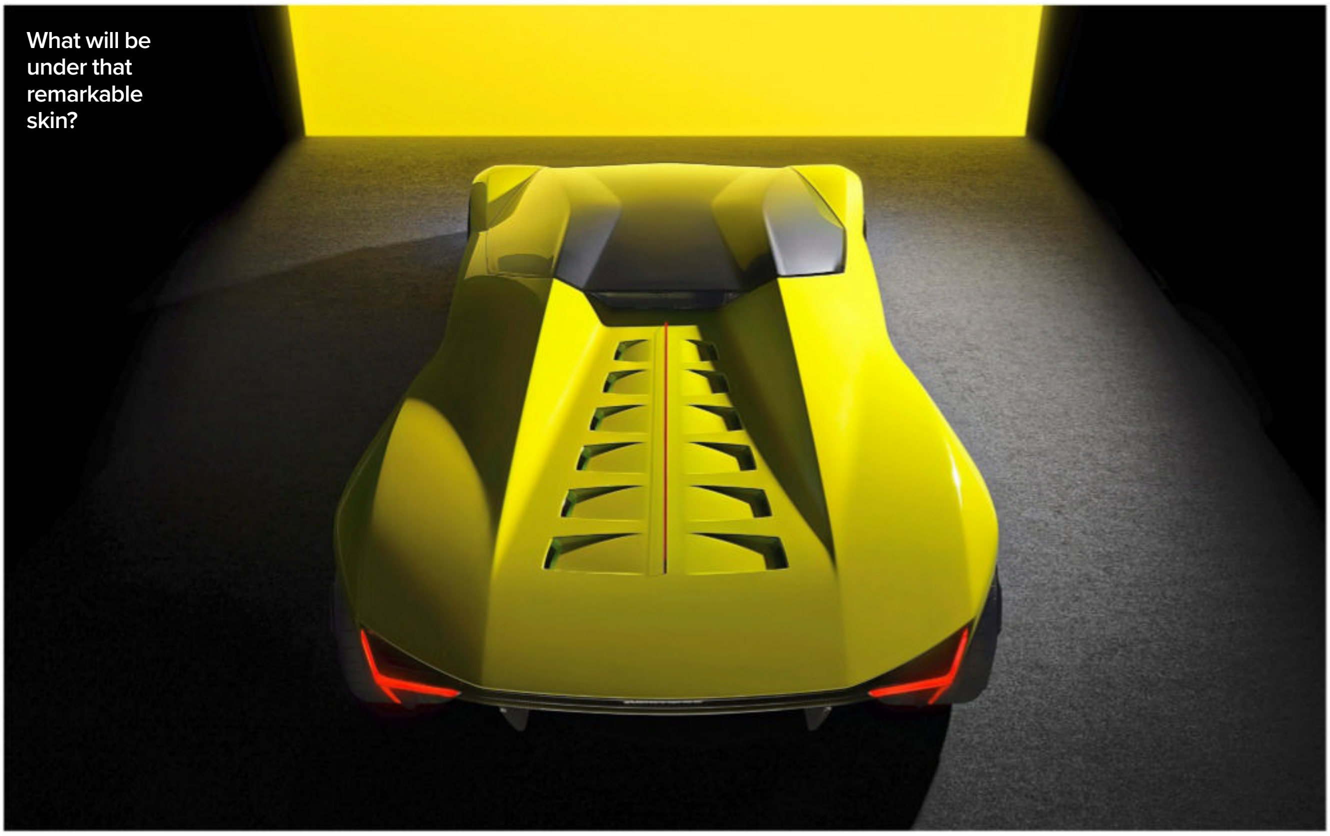
AI, used wisely, may help. 'Everything is in a state of fast-forward flux, most importantly technology and processes,' says Borkert. 'Visualisation is now a matter of minutes, be it static or animated. Angles, colours and backgrounds are easily altered, extensive simulation makes early prototyping virtually redundant, execution is often only a push of a button away.

'The sole trigger AI needs is an idea. But that idea still makes the difference, because it is generated by a human brain, not a computer. AI needs to be trained to understand history and heritage, and what it takes to compose a specific brand culture and identity. AI is a new instrument that plays the same old music. It makes our work easier because it does a better and quicker job. But the root of good design – the vision and how to achieve it – must always be in your head.'

With many Chinese manufacturers succeeding thanks to a combination of superior batteries, faster chips and good value for money, design has become an even more important decider for European premium brands. But ▶

424
1,305
1,592
1,600
2,087
2,406
2,430
2003
2004
2005
2006
2007
2008
2009
2010

Winkelmann shows the end result of all that creativity



What will be under that remarkable skin?

where to go in a market flooded with cars clearly inspired by the Porsche Taycan, Macan, Panamera and Cayenne, not to mention the Range Rover?

De'Silva has some strong views on the subject, and is not shy about sharing them: 'We are about to become followers of the copiers. Just look at Alfa Romeo, Lancia and Maserati. These marques were a cut above the rest. Now they are in the epicentre of disaster, a real tragedy. The way out of this dilemma? The European brands need to recapture and re imagine their identity. We must again create cars that overwhelm and inspire – no words needed, no explanations required, a convincing shape tells it all. Giving customers products they are dreaming of without them actually knowing that they want them, to me that's the holy grail of car design.'

Like de'Silva, Fillipo Perini – now with the Italian EV start-up Aehra – believes striking and innovative design is essential if European brands are to shake off the problems they've caused themselves by being too inflexible and predictable. Perini suggests starting by abandoning traditional platforms saddled with too many fixed points. Instead, a variable dash-to-axle ratio would make it a lot easier to create breakthrough proportions and exciting new body styles.

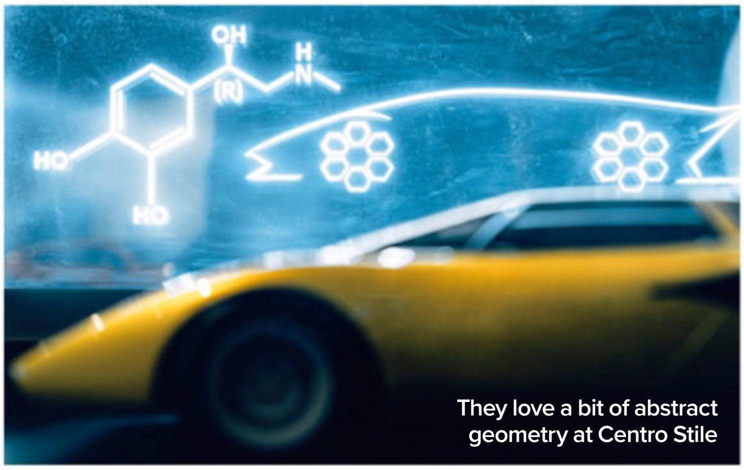
'But we need to be quick,' he adds, 'because the world's best copiers are about to switch into full attack mode.'

Fabrizio Giugiaro – son of the legendary Giorgetto Giugiaro, and an established designer in his own right – judges the European establishment even more harshly. 'In the mass market, the big Chinese names like SAIC, BYD and Geely have already won the war, no doubt about that. In the luxury segment, the new Asian prestige brands are preparing cleaner, more sophisticated designs that are more chic and emotional while putting an even stronger emphasis on old-world fortes like top-notch materials and craftsmanship. In my view, the copying years are over, but the consolidation phase we are about to experience may hurt even more because the Chinese will beat us with our own weapons.'

Lamborghini is determined to steer clear of that doomsday scenario. Despite the modest headcount, Centro Stile is well equipped and fully prepared to broaden and sharpen the brand's design language. To up the ante, Lamborghini has hired digital 3D modellers capable of producing virtual models and visualisations along with feasibility designers who swiftly translate concepts into production reality.

What unites the team is a highly competitive yet cooperative mindset. 'Curiosity is essential,' insists Borkert. 'We must deliver the unexpected, dare to experiment, lay bare glimpses of an even more radical future.'

A small group meets periodically in the so-called 'crazy corner' at Centro Stile to speculate about what the next 20 years might bring, and what role Lamborghini should play. The Manifesto signals the start of the next phase of this journey. 'It's a sculpture which shows how we believe lines and surfaces should connect and interact,' says Borkert. 'It is a fantasy firmly anchored in reality, a bold teaser on a thrilling mission.'



They love a bit of abstract geometry at Centro Stile

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MOTORSPORT

Extreme E did a lot of good. Pity about the racing

Colin Overland Production editor

▶ **Well, that's the end of** Extreme E. It almost made its point. It almost worked. Now, after a farewell event in Saudi Arabia, it's finished, replaced by the hydrogen-based Extreme H.

If we're sounding unduly negative about a well-intentioned attempt to run an all-electric off-road race series in a sustainable and awareness-raising way, then blame the boat. The boat was a booby trap Extreme E dug for itself, walked straight in to, and while it was down there kept on digging.

The boat, you may recall, was a former Royal Mail ship called *St Helena* that chugged between Extreme E venues over the course of the world championship's four and a bit seasons, the idea being that it would be a floating paddock and would transport the cars, rather than having convoys of artics harmfully trundling from one event to another.

Thing is, it ran on diesel, albeit low-sulphur diesel. There was talk about one day replacing those old engines with electric motors, but that didn't happen. And in any case the drivers still flew in, spewing harmful pollutants as if they'd been competing in any other race series.

In the same spirit, there were no spectators at the events, which succeeded in cutting the carbon footprint, and meant the races could be held in ecologically sensitive areas, which were then restored after the race was done, and legacy schemes set in place.

The positive side of going to locations with specific environmental challenges was that the drivers, and the cameras, could see for themselves the effects of climate change on, for instance, biodiversity in Chile and the beaver population of Dorset. Cue lots of awkward photos of racing drivers picking litter off beaches etc. But at least it got some race fans talking about issues they may previously have found easier to ignore.

The downside of having no spectators was the accompanying absence of atmosphere, like those Covid-era football matches in empty stadiums.

It was a race series meant to be streamed on your phone. But what that potentially huge audience saw just wasn't very engrossing. Very few cars competed, and they all looked much the same bar some sponsor stickers. And they sounded like angry milk floats.

Also, the format – qualifiers, heats, consolation races and a final – was confusing. What a waste of some top talent: drivers who came and went included Sébastien Loeb, Nasser Al-Attiyah, Jenson Button and a bunch of Scandinavian rallycross aces.

But credit where it's due: Extreme E successfully raised the profile of several talented female drivers. Those who have passed through include Jamie Chadwick – whose recent successes include three wins in the 2025 European Le Mans series – plus Dakar drivers Cristina Gutiérrez Herrero (with Dacia) and Sara Price (Land Rover).

And the rule that each car must be driven by one male and one female, swapping mid-race, is being followed by Extreme H, which has more modestly restricted itself to one event in its inaugural season.

As close to conventional racing as it ever got

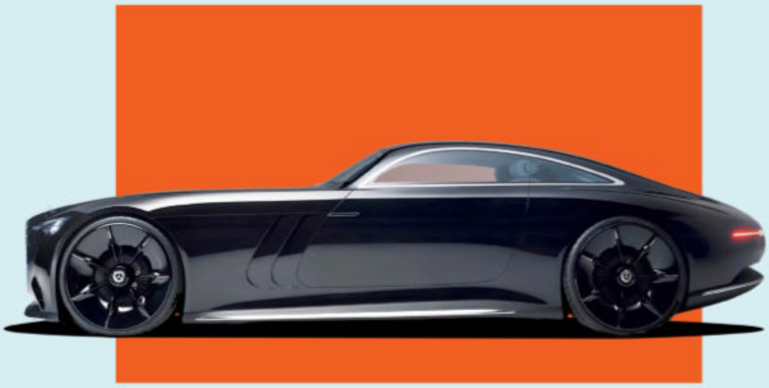
NEW CARS

Who’s your hero?

Jake Groves News editor

Sébastien Ogier

▶ **Toyota is offering you another** chance to buy one of the greatest hot hatches ever built, as a new limited-edition version of the Toyota GR Yaris is announced. Priced at £48,995, the Aero Performance is an even more aggressive version complete with a vast rear wing that can be manually adjusted to suit your driving style, as well as a revised front splitter. Live out your special stage fantasies with that fabulous all-wheel-drive powertrain and vertical, rally-style handbrake, both of which are ideal for wild drifts on gravel tracks. As with every special version of the GR Yaris, though, be quick.



Cruella de Vil

▶ **Mercedes is looking to its** past to guide its future. The Vision Iconic concept, which nods to GTs of the ’30s and the 300 SL of the ’50s, gives some hints about the next S-Class. It has the prominent grille already seen on the GLC EV, while the body is finished in Merc’s ‘solar coating’ – an ultra-thin layer of photovoltaic paint that absorbs the sun’s rays and helps charge the car. Merc is also trialling ‘neuromorphic’ AI – technology that mimics how a brain works to more efficiently run digital systems. It’s also claimed to have Level 4 autonomy– fully self-driving in some areas – and steer-by-wire.

James Bond

▶ **Aston Martin’s next S express** after the hotted-up Vantage and DBX is the DB12 S. It follows the same formula, including a power bump (to 690bhp) as well as a drop in kerbweight; new carbon-ceramic brakes remove 27kg of unsprung mass, for example, while a new exhaust system lops off another 11kg. Unique front skirts and wheels are among the tweaks designed to sharpen up the look, while hardcore carbonfibre seats can be fitted for the more athletic Aston Martin customer. Want a DB12 S? Expect to hand over around £220k when deliveries begin in early 2026.

Andreas Mikkelsen

▶ **It’s the fastest Fabia ever,** and it isn’t even a vRS? Crazy talk. The new Fabia 130 is designed as a nod to 130 years of Skoda motorsport heritage and comes with some actually-quite-good performance enhancements. It’s based on the already-sporty Monte Carlo version, but here the 1.5-litre four-cylinder engine has been bumped up from 148bhp to 175bhp, with bespoke throttle mapping to make better use of the torque. Sports suspension, relaxed stability control and new decals finish the package. Shame it’s a DSG only, though – this thing is crying out for a manual ’box.

SMALL CARS

Small, smart and cheap: Dacia's kei-inspired Hipster

Jake Groves News editor

▶ **Dacia's hit a lucky break.** At around the same time it pulled the covers off its tiny, clever Hipster electric concept, the European Commission backed legal recognition for a new kind of vehicle – and that could make it feasible for a production version of the Hipster to go on sale at a very competitive price.

The Hipster draws inspiration from Japan's 'kei' cars: cheap, modestly powered lightweight urban tiddlers that benefit from lower insurance and tax.

'Millions of Europeans want to buy affordable European cars, so we should also invest in small, affordable vehicles,' Commission president Ursula von der Leyen said during her 2025 State of the Union address in September. 'I believe Europe should have its own e-car. E for environmental, economical and European.'

New Dacia CEO Katrin Adt has confirmed that Hipster production would be possible: the Renault Group 'has all the necessary assets' to make it happen. Design director David Durand goes further: 'To be clear, we are really working on the hypothesis to put this on the street.'

In its current form, the Hipster falls between two European vehicle categories. The Citroën Ami, for instance, is classed as an L7 heavy quadricycle. But the Dacia might be slightly too heavy to qualify (the rules say a maximum of 450kg without the battery). But M1, the classification of conventional passenger cars, demands that a new car should include all the assistance and safety systems required by General Safety Regulations 2. A version of the Hipster that met M1 could end up costing the same as Dacia's Spring, which wouldn't make commercial sense. But a new category that followed Japan's lead, with regulations appropriate to its low power and modest size, should make it viable.

The Renault Group is not alone in calling for this new class of car. Its traditional rivals at Stellantis – home to Peugeot and Citroën – also want political backing for simpler, cheaper European cars.

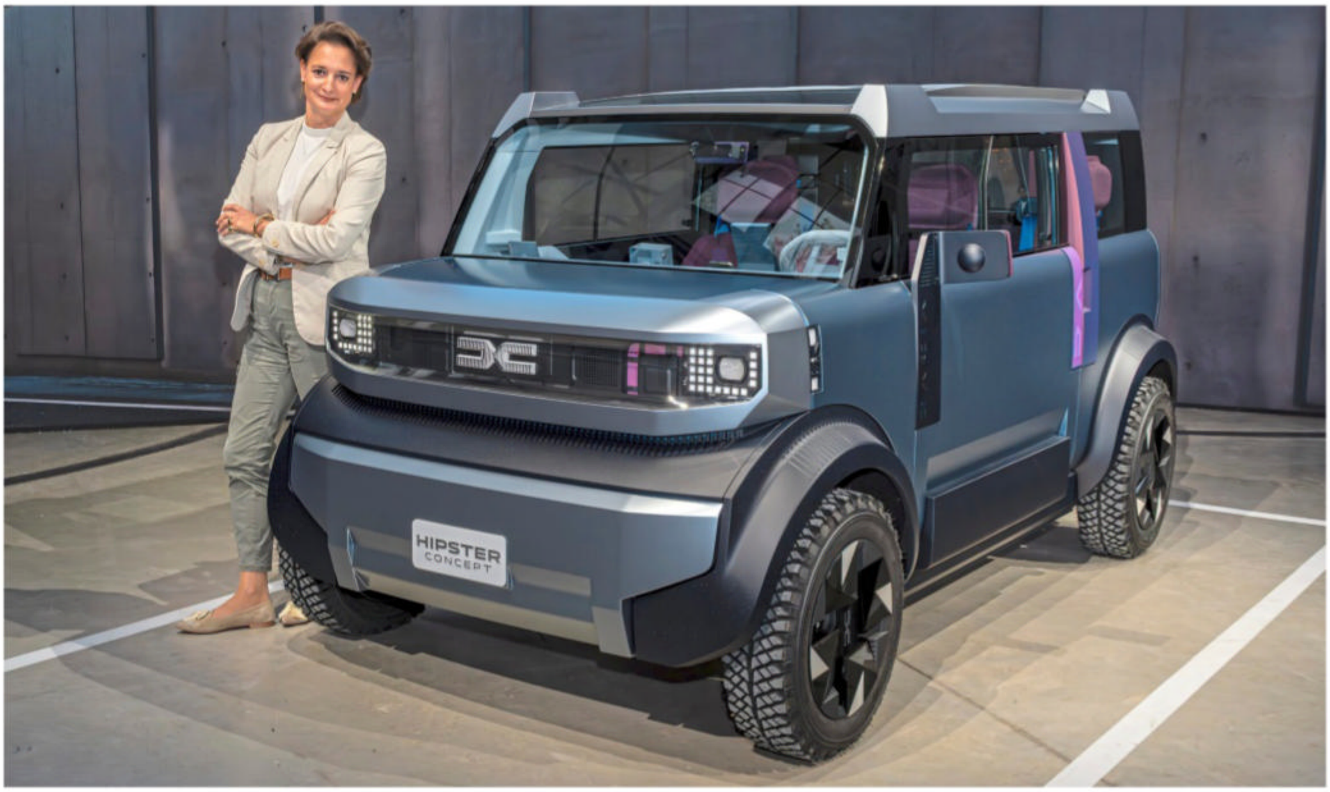
In concept form, the Hipster fits four people, or two and a 500-litre boot. It has a compact battery that should be good for a range of 125 miles, and it weighs about 200kg less than the already light Spring, which tips the scales at around 980kg, and is priced from £14,995.

It has been designed for maximum space within its boxy body. The windows slide forwards and back – like the original Renault 4 – rather than going up and down, allowing the doors to the slimmer while still incorporating armrests and stowage space.

The look and feel of the interior is much more modern and stark than the conventional Spring, and it makes extensive use of lightweight materials. Sitting inside, it doesn't feel cramped behind the chunky steering wheel. The dash includes a small portrait-format screen that conveys basic information such as speed. There's also a phone holder, and dotted around the cabin are Dacia's YouClip fixing points that make it simple to add accessories such as a portable Bluetooth speaker.

The future sound of Europe? Hope so.

Hipster hints at a possible new kind of Dacia, says Katrin Adt



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Lotus Eleven, blowing minds for 70 years

INNOVATION

Lotus: time to tell the untold story

Colin Overland Production editor

▶ **Elise. Esprit. Elan. No, they're** not here today. The greatest hits are absent from this compilation. Instead I'm looking at a random-seeming handful of prototypes, experimental vehicles, seats, suspension components and a black box. In fact it's not random, because they've been carefully selected to showcase the decades-long Lotus habit of exploring strange new worlds.

It's a story Lotus is keen to tell at the moment, when it's all too easy to think it's abandoned what we most love it for (lightweight sports cars) in favour of something that may briefly have seemed like a good idea in a boardroom in Wuhan (big, expensive EVs) before it then revealed itself to be a terrible idea.

Or, viewed more positively, an idea out of sync with the mood of the times. That interpretation ties in with a

> **Some experiments have been raging successes. Others get filed away for use on another project at another time**

company history brimming with examples of innovation for its own sake – sometimes in pursuit of racetrack advantage, at other times because a secret big-name client has asked it to, and often just to find out.

Occasionally the results have been raging immediate successes – take the breakthroughs with carbonfibre, active suspension and aerodynamics in Formula 1. Often the results have been the sort of thing you file away for use on another project at another time, or quietly forget.

Ben Payne, the company's design chief, is not pretending Lotus is in a comfortable place right now. At the time of writing, it looks as though around a third of the workforce at Hethel in Norfolk – where they build the Emira sports car, and do all manner of engineering projects – could lose their jobs. EV production in China is also below the planned level. But, as we reported previously, hybrid versions of the Eletre and Emeya EVs are on the way. 'There are new developments coming,' Payne confirms. 'We're looking at the new technology that will provide the right experience.'

Payne is showing me some manifestations of the lesser-told Lotus story, temporarily on display at the flagship London showroom. The mix of old, current and futuristic cars is stopping Mayfair shoppers in their tracks; they're all amazing-looking creations, from the 1956 Lotus Eleven to the recent Theory 1 concept. And, Payne insists, they all look so striking because of their focus on function, with minimal ornamentation, unless you count the JPS paint on the Lotus 92 F1 car, a pioneer of active suspension.

The Eleven is a particular favourite of Payne's, a car that inspired aspects of the long, low Emeya GT. It scored some speed records and Le Mans successes. It was also remarkably light and very sleek thanks to advanced aeronautical-inspired aerodynamics.

'It stands out as an exemplar of taking technology from one industry and applying it to something else. This is the first example of a faired-in body from Lotus, where from the driver's seat you see the muscular bulges over the front wheels. It's still a reference point for Lotus.'

Aerodynamic innovation and clever use of carbonfibre have helped Lotus not only on the road and in F1 but also in cycle racing, most notably with Chris Boardman's Olympic gold-winning Type 108.

'The Eleven's so simple and so pure. In its simplicity and beauty it's super special. It looks like a spaceship but it's not been styled. It looks like that as a consequence of what it needs to do. It's completely authentic.'

By contrast, the SID prototype (for 'structure isolation and dynamics') from 1992 is hardly a looker. It resembles an Esprit that's been parked in a ditch for a couple of years. In fact there was no Esprit involved under the skin – it had its own chassis and the engine from an MG Metro 6R4 rally car. It was an experimental research vehicle combining active and passive suspension, active rear steering and comprehensive data acquisition that was a huge step forward in enabling Lotus to attach numbers to various dynamic qualities.

'It captured the data, some of it from F1 drivers on our test track, like never before. This was the first time where they could take the intangible things people would say – "the car feels like x" – and then you look at the data and find out what it means,' says Payne.

Some of the learnings turned up on a military tank. Lotus isn't all about founder Colin Chapman's 'simplify, then add lightness' mantra

Also in 1992, in a separate project, Lotus was working on super-lightweight materials for seats and other components, some of them plant based, some of them recycled. Yes, in 1992. Today, a lot of work is going on with 3D printing and hollow casting – ways of making strong, light components, with minimal waste in their creation.

Payne sums up: 'Our product line-up has evolved a lot as we've embraced new technology, which the company always did. At the time, some things worked, some things are less successful, but it's about keeping moving forward, trying to find what the right recipe is.

'Technological advancement is moving so quickly these days, and everyone's scrabbling to find the right recipe, but you need to stay true to your brand values.'

Theory 1 nails Payne's ideas about function shaping form

First drives

THE WORLD'S BEST WRITERS IN THE NEW CARS THAT MATTER

FERRARI 296 SPECIALE

Splash and dash

How do you improve on the already mighty 296 GTB? That's the challenge facing the 296 Speciale, successor to 488 Pista – that and some atrocious weather

Words Adam Towler **Photography** Lee Brimble

FERRARI
296
SPECIALE

The 300-mile test

NEW CAR MEETS REAL WORLD

Revised air intakes aid both cooling and downforce

For such a fast car, on-road ride quality is remarkable

Even a wound-up 296 Speciale can't outrun a rain cloud as purple and pregnant as the one spanning the Emilia-Romagna skyline. Part of me would love to try, because we were due back at Fiorano, Ferrari's test track, about an hour ago. Nevertheless, if I've learnt one thing above all others this morning, it's that 868bhp on these narrow, twisting roads up in the hills, polished by a summer of baking Italian sunshine and now streaming with rainwater, isn't to be treated casually. Better to be late than in the hedge.

The hybrid 296 Speciale is the latest car in one of Maranello's most revered bloodlines. First there was the raw, brilliant 360 Challenge Stradale, complete with the clatter of flying pebbles on bare metal floors and the kidney thump of the infernal single-clutch semi-auto transmission. Then came the razor sharp 430 Scuderia, currently the most overlooked member of this family; an all-new naturally-aspirated V8 (F136 replacing 'Dino') and a big step forward in chassis electronics.

Then 'the one', the mesmerising 458 Speciale, a car still regarded as possibly the greatest driver's car ever built, a spine-tingling, life-affirming ball of balletic fury on four wheels. Finally, the turbocharged 488 Pista of 2018, ultimately more capable and faster, but not quite such a captivating personality.

On paper, the increase in power for the 296's 3.0-litre 120° V6 doesn't sound particularly impressive – just 36bhp. Yet with the little V6 already churning out 654bhp, there simply wasn't much scope for more, especially as Ferrari didn't want to increase the size of the turbochargers and harm throttle response.

But there was still plenty of engine work to be done, drawing on learnings from other cars using engines of the same family, which include the new F80 hypercar, its multiple Le Mans-winning 499P and the 296 series (including the GT3 and Challenge racing cars). And so there are stronger pistons and titanium conrods from the F80 that are 35 per cent lighter than those in a 296 GTB/GTS, and a redesigned head that enables a seven per cent increase in combustion chamber pressure.

Revised turbos, weighing 1.2kg less, have an evolved boost management strategy, while the steel crank is new, and smarter machining of the engine block saves further weight; even the stud bolts and various fasteners are titanium. The V6 is 9kg lighter. It's connected to an eight-speed twin-clutch gearbox that benefits from a new e-motor torque-fill function known as Fast Shift. There are new forged rims wearing a bespoke K1 version of Michelin's Cup 2 tyre, which Ferrari's engineers insisted should retain a broad window of usability in all conditions.

Carbon-ceramic discs sit in new forged alloy rims

Winglets work with small active rear wing, very effectively

Ferrari offers the Speciale with the choice of variable MagneRide damping or passive Multimatic dampers. (UK cars will likely be MagneRide as standard, together with the suspension lifter and bumpy road mode, and the Multimatic dampers optional.) The Speciale sits 5mm lower than the GTB, with a 13 per cent reduction in bodyroll, although it's claimed to retain its ride comfort on the road, especially if fitted with MagneRide.

Styling and aerodynamic performance are here completely entwined. The front grille area is opened up for increased cooling, and cut-outs to the side usher airflow down the flanks, generating downforce. Critically, there's now a vent in the bonnet – referred to as the 'air damper' by Ferrari – that allows air drawn in by a hole in the floor to be extracted over the body, thereby creating not only more front-end downforce, but also improving ▶

Pick-up: 0 miles

It's a wet morning at Fiorano but my disposition is relentlessly sunny given that I'm striding towards a 296 Speciale with *CAR*'s name on it.

2 miles

It's wide, and visibility isn't great at junctions, but first impression is that you could use this car easily every day. That's surely not the Speciale way…

5 miles

This revised interior, with physical buttons, is a step forward over Ferrari's unwise haptic era, but I still find it confusing and fiddly.

Track-friendly Speciale 5mm lower than regular 296

That's one very shiny surface and one very grunty car

stability. Small grilles at the edges of the bonnet, inspired by the GT3 racer, extract air from the front wheelarches.

At the rear, the diffuser is larger, and there are flat edges to the rear haunches, taken from the 296 Challenge, which clean up the car's wake. The 'gamma wings' – small winglets across the back of the car, like those on the FXX-K – work in conjunction with the small active rear wing that now has three positions. Ferrari claims a 20 per cent increase in downforce, without any increase in drag, equating to 435kg at 155mph. Some 70 per cent of the improvement is on the front end, highlighting the desire to really make this car responsive on turn-in.

Also assisting its agility is the weight saving. The Speciale can be up to 60kg lighter than a GTB as long as you specify the carbonfibre bumpers and engine cover, although that comes at a price: you lose the theatricality of a visible engine.

My introduction to the Speciale at Maranello comes in the shadow of the original courtyard, where Michael Schumacher once looked down from his home-from-home. I press the still underwhelming haptic start button (see page 10) at the base of the steering-wheel boss, and glide away in eDrive mode. The Speciale's electric range is short, but enough for hushed getaways at ungodly hours, and as I merge into the hum of Maranello's morning traffic the main sound is of large volumes of water on the road sloshing against the underside of the 296.

As with its forebears, the floor is bare metal, its welds a visible reminder that Ferrari still hasn't chosen to ape rivals such as McLaren with full carbon construction. I've already pressed the *manettino* button to access 'bumpy road' mode and it's with a rather nerdy sense of awe that ▸

28 miles

Harness holds you firmly in place. You'll be cursing it when you arrive at a toll booth, though, and so will those in the lengthening queue behind you.

82 miles

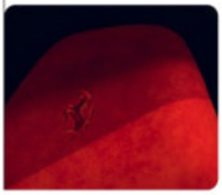
I don't expect to feel the effects of the increased aero on the road, but the high-speed stability on the autostrada is really quite something.

141 miles

UK-market 296 Speciales get these Scuderia Ferrari shields fitted as standard. If you would rather have a painted logo instead, that's £9517.

It's with a rather nerdy sense of awe that I process just how refined this Special series car is

214 miles



Reclining buckets are one of two seat options. They should make sense in a car designed for track and fast road use, but in fact make my back ache.

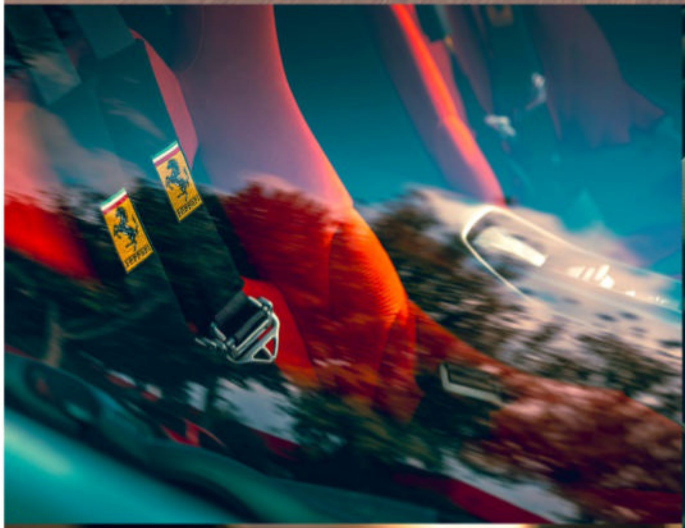
225 miles

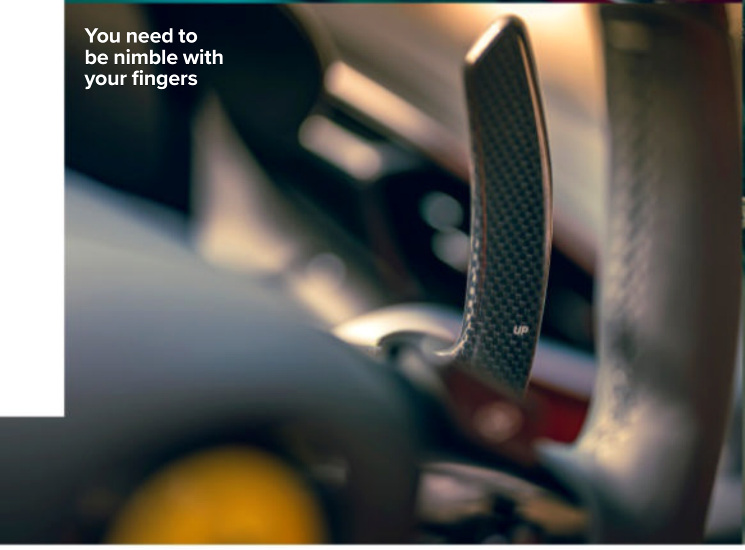
Finally, the rain has stopped, but this pensive expression betrays how I really feel just before tackling a hillside pass with a surface like wet marble.

256 miles

There's nothing quite like driving a Ferrari in the Italian countryside. But we're behind schedule, so no time for soaking up the Florentine sights.

Lots of aero, lots of noise, lots of power… but lots of rain





You need to be nimble with your fingers

Optional reclining buckets cup your thighs

The Speciale is staggeringly rapid, even when you squeeze the throttle gently in fourth, yet it's absurdly flexible in sixth gear

I process just how refined and generally undemanding this Special series Ferrari is. Be in no doubt, you could commute daily to the office in this car.

I soon flick through to Hybrid mode, which introduces the combustion element where appropriate, and then settle in Performance, where both sources combine for faster driving, while also protecting the charge in the 7.45kWh battery, so there's some electric-only capability retained. Performance is exceeded only by Qualify mode, which uses the electric motor to bring more boost out of slower corners. The car is clever enough to work out where and how much of a boost on any given lap of a circuit will help most. At Fiorano the car can access this 14 times every lap, benefitting from the full electric 178bhp, taking the power increase over the standard 296 up to 49bhp.

It takes a while to place it, but there's no mistake: between 1600 and 2000rpm on a brush of constant throttle the Speciale's engine note is a dead ringer for the decrepit Peterbilt hauling hard in Steven Spielberg's debut *Duel*. That choppy, resonant rumble gives way to a complex V6 blare in the midrange, the exhaust note recognisable if you've been trackside at a WEC race in recent years, before thinning out and crystallising into a frenzied thrash as the limiter approaches.

It couldn't possibly possess the pure scream of the 458's motor, but you can make up for that by focusing on the noises from the turbocharging apparatus, best sampled with the windows cracked open. Be aggressive on the throttle and the chirrups, snaffles and hysterical gargles betray the madness going on over your shoulder. An e-motor-enhanced upshift gives you an added whipcrack.

Which is entirely in keeping with the 296 Speciale's performance. It's staggeringly rapid. Your warning of this is writ large from the moment you squeeze the throttle gently in, say, fourth gear, at 2000rpm, which will send the Speciale bolting forward, filling the gap to the vehicle in front and requiring an immediate lift of your right foot. Change up a ratio and the effect is barely diminished. Even in sixth it's absurdly flexible.

Amazing on track, both measurably and emotionally

In the interests of science, I clack down into second, turn the traction control off and floor it. In an instant I feel the rear axle tramping as the rears froth puddles and the Speciale snaps sideways. The effect is similar in third, even in fourth. Having lulled me into believing it was relatively house-trained, the Speciale now reveals its gnashers – and it turns out to have all the table manners of an alligator.

The rain just won't stop falling. Our usual route for evaluating Ferraris we've picked up from the factory, some 40 minutes south of Maranello, is enveloped in low meandering cloud, raindrops kicking up from tarmac that has taken quite a pounding over the years from high-performance test mules straight out of the factories dotted around Supercar Valley. So we make a snap decision: take the autostrada until we can find some other good roads clear of this murk.

In these grim conditions, there are two overlapping aspects of the 296 Speciale that are on your side as you engage in the constant challenge of enjoying that amazing engine without coming to grief. The deftly tuned electronic stability systems allow you to drive up to their limits without feeling like you're clumsily overstepping the mark. And then there's the brilliant chassis. There's the same fast, direct steering that's become a Ferrari hallmark, but with a little more weight to lean on now, and a beautiful sense that you can place the car exactly where you want it combined with an oily consistency, free from any unwanted interference.

Slalom down a dry road – yes, we do find some – by jabbing the wheel left and right and the car's willingness to change direction is astounding, with the emphasis on ▸

PLUS

Outstanding performance and chassis; usability; visual impact

MINUS

Too usable for a Special series car?

275 miles

Back at Fiorano, surrounded by horsepower in many forms, including a tractor. The red F104 Starfighter that once raced a Ferrari F1 car is nearby too.

295 miles

Track driving in the Speciale is intense, my brain heating up as I try to string together a good lap and shout at a video camera at the same time.

302 miles

The Speciale is friendly as long as the stability control is in Race mode. With all assistance off, a long, smokey slide is just a stab of the throttle away.

18:42
20°
CT OFF
Status overview
0 km/h
P
AUTO

ENGINE
START
STOP

the nose being nailed down to the road, the rear mobile but secure in enabling such agility.

Miraculously, such dynamic gymnastics haven't had a detrimental effect on ride quality. It's admirably compliant, with a level of suspension tuning that verges on absolute witchcraft, a trick only Ferrari and Porsche seem able to pull off consistently. It just glides over even terrible broken surfaces.

Fiorano beckons, and by now the last of the damp patches have receded. It's a shame the car we'll use on track is different: it may be in the same Verde Nürburgring colour, but it's fitted with the passive dampers and Cup 2R tyres, so a direct comparison is impossible. Nonetheless, driving the 296 Speciale on track is an eye-opener. I don't think I'll ever forget the moment I really hook it up through the gears: lights blink on the wheel, numbers escalate frantically in my peripheral vision, and if I'm too slow to twitch my fingers on the right-hand paddle then the limiter rat-a-tat-tats its unwanted greeting.

Hold it flat on the short main straight at Fiorano and the 296 hits an indicated 160mph before I get hard on the brakes for the tight right-hander at the end. That carbon-ceramic set-up feels more than up to the task. The nose is keen to turn – it only takes a flick of the wrists – before I can get back on the power; the smoother the better, rather than stomping on the pedal. I'm using Race, letting the car's electronics do their thing and manage away excesses power as I reacquaint myself with the track.

Into the esses, the line requires simultaneous turning and stopping – always awkward. The rear is stable, a sure sign of the work Ferrari has done with the 6D sensor and the ABS Evo set-up; hard braking is possible right into the first apex. As I flick the car one way then the other, I feel the sheer grip, and I notice I'm breathing heavily. For a road car this is an intense and physical experience, despite the lightness of the controls, and the stopwatch says it's 2.5 seconds a lap quicker around here than a GTB.

When I pull back into the pitlane there's a huge smile plastered over my face and I feel like I need to find a quiet corner and process it all.

The Speciale has delivered a colossal bolt of excitement, but there's a nagging thought that won't leave my mind: at the risk of sounding ridiculous, part of me thinks the performance is almost too accessible and the car too accommodating. Is it also… too fast?

Ferrari says this is a car pitched at existing 296 owners looking to step up to an even faster, more capable machine. They are typically owners used to the broad bandwidth of the GTB/GTS, who would like to retain almost all of that civility. This isn't a race refugee, a tool that requires a certain amount of self-sacrifice, a pleasure/pain equilibrium that only hardcore driving enthusiasts will tolerate. There is room for such a car – lighter, defiantly offering less power, more focused – but that would be something else; I'd call it the 296 Challenge Stradale. But in the meantime, the Speciale is truly exceptional.

Data

PRICE
£359,779

POWERTRAIN
2992cc twin-turbo V6 plus e-motor, eight-speed dual-clutch automatic, rear-wheel drive

PERFORMANCE
868bhp @ 8000rpm, 557lb ft @ 6000rpm, 2.8sec 0-62mph, 205mph

WEIGHT
1410kg (dry)

EFFICIENCY
19-28mpg, 230-329g/km CO2

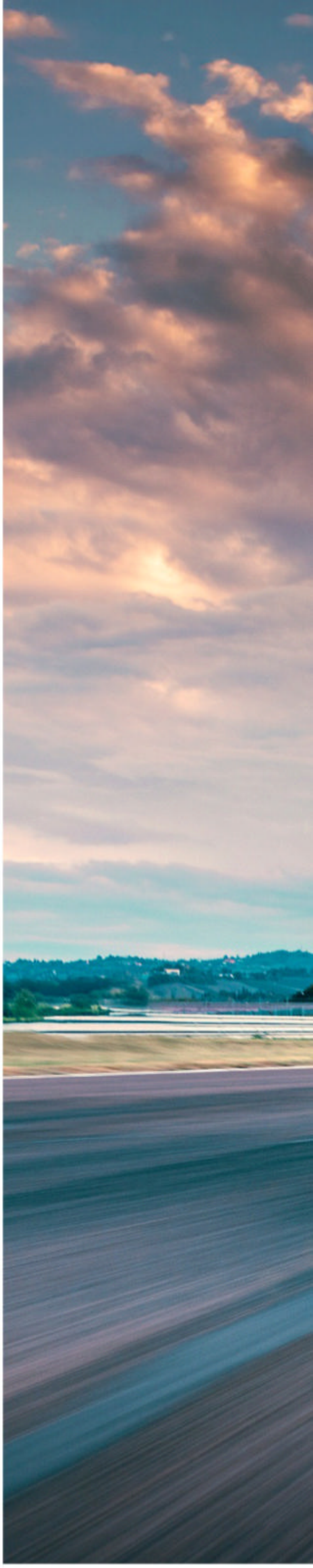
ON SALE
Now

RATING
★★★★★

Next month

HYUNDAI IONIQ 6 N

THE 5 N'S GREAT. IS THE 6 N BETTER?



For a road car this is an intense and physical experience, delivering a colossal bolt of excitement

WATCH THE VIDEO!
GET *CAR*'S DIGITAL EDITION – SEE PAGE 54

P39
ENGINEERING PROTOTYPE
RMLGROUP
B6 RML

How is a car so viciously fast also this approachable and enjoyable?

Absence of bright colours does not make this low-key

Mal Bailey

RML GT HYPERCAR

Storm bringer

Like a rolling thundercloud, RML's incredible take on the 911 creates drama and excitement wherever it goes

If there's one thing I was hoping to avoid today it was rain, and yet here I am with over 900bhp at my right foot and water falling from the sky diagonally. What might have been a terrifying situation is in fact more complicated than that, because there's no denying the joy and admiration I feel at the same time as fear.

It's all down to the brilliance of the RML GT Hypercar, or P39 if you favour the internal code. How on Earth is something so viciously fast also this approachable and enjoyable despite a Midlands monsoon?

The answer lies at the Northamptonshire HQ of RML. If the name rings a bell, that may well be because the firm has constructed some very successful BTCC and endurance racers; it's also responsible for a lot of secret 'white label' engineering for various unnamed car manufacturers. Not all of it's secret; projects that can be discussed include the entire Nio EP9 electric supercar and the hybrid batteries for the Czinger 21C.

But the RML GT Hypercar is not a car built for somebody else. This wears an RML badge, and showcases the breadth and depth of the firm's talents. RML has a division for its own cars, called Bespoke. Like the division's first effort, the 250 Short Wheelbase, the GT Hypercar uses an existing sports car, a Porsche 911, as a starting point. Not the GT3 RS, as the wing might suggest, but the 992.1 Turbo S.

The P39 development car you see here was previously RML Bespoke head Michael Mallock's own everyday car, and was used to collect data that informed the decision to go ahead and create the GT Hypercar.

All the original bodywork is stripped away and then replaced by carbonfibre, and production cars also get a full interior retrim. The wing and roof scoop are both inspired by the Porsche GT1, the loosely 911-based Porsche sportscar racer from the '90s. They're functional, not decorative. The suspension is replaced by wider new ▶

THE FIRST HOUR

1 minute
Sun-bleached carbon is reminiscent of the original 911 GT1 test car. Yummy

12 minutes
Vocal turbochargers are aurally entertaining even in regular traffic

21 minutes
No rear window means a camera mirror, which helps with parking

23 minutes
Finally a chance to let rip, briefly. Traction is as impressive as the power

47 minutes
It still works amazingly well when the rain is horizontal

PLUS

Vast breadth of easily accessed performance; engineering depth

MINUS

Imagine someone reversing into it while you're buying a Twix

Incredible grip. Handy with 907bhp in the wet

Wider than a 911 Turbo, and no rear window. Hmm

Focused, but more comfy than it looks

It finds tremendous traction despite the big uplift in power, so the force at which you're expelled from the apex is quite something

wishbones that also contribute to a small increase in wheelbase. Negative camber is up massively to boost cornering grip.

RML has created the GT Hypercar using the assumption that the typical owner will drive it 75 per cent on the road and the rest on track. Here it can be hydraulically lowered at all four corners to improve aerodynamics and give far more aggressive suspension settings. RML's preferred tyre is a Michelin Cup 2 – not the R – yet it claims the GT Hypercar can manage lap times faster than a slick-tyred GT4 racer.

To put it another way, it's expected to lap the Nordschleife 32 seconds faster than a stock 992.1, at 6min 45sec. Given RML's vast experience on track and the involvement of racing driver Tom Chilton in the car's development, I wouldn't bet against that.

It would be unfair to comment on this prototype's largely stock interior, although all the switchgear and infotainment will be retained. As Michael Mallock points out, why change something that works perfectly well for the sake of it? This approach keeps the price down to an almost reasonable £600k plus the donor car, or less than half as much as RML's 250 SWB. One key addition is a four-dial adjustment system on the steering wheel for the drivetrain, aero, suspension and drive mode.

Firing up the GT Hypercar leaves you in no doubt about the added potency, the engine settling into a much deeper idle than a regular 992.1 Turbo S, thanks to a freer-breathing exhaust and air intake. There's a new intercooler and uprated turbos, yet the core of the engine is unchanged. Even Porsche's cams remain, and the gearbox is completely stock. RML has outsourced this powertrain work to renowned tuning specialist Litchfield, so you know it's unlikely to go pop prematurely.

We're not visiting the track today, instead focusing on the GT Hypercar's road performance. Creeping out of RML's yard and into busy traffic is made only slightly more intimidating by the car being 90mm wider than a stock Turbo. There's lots more turbo noise, of both the sucking and chuffing kind, even with moderate throttle openings, but the PDK dual-clutch transmission is as smooth as ever and happy to work unobtrusively in the background.

The ride is way better than the looks would suggest. Set for normal height and stiffness, it's supple enough to deal with anything Northamptonshire's roads can throw at it. RML retains the four-wheel steering and active suspension management of the donor car, and both play nicely with the new suspension components. Turn-in feels more GT3 RS, despite the GT Hypercar being a good couple of hundred kilos heavier, but corner exit is pure Turbo, and then some.

It still finds tremendous traction despite the big uplift in power, so the force at which you're expelled from the apex is quite something, all with a rear-biased but reassuringly controlled balance. You don't quite get the clarity of a GT3's steering, because of this car's additional driven wheels, but I still know what's going on up front and feel involved in the process.

I'm not getting anywhere near this car's limits, but even so it's quite an experience. Really open the taps and the intake noise turns demonic Dyson; then when you ease off the gas it sounds like Darth Vader being brutally tickled. Worries about the boosted flat-six lacking character disappear as the GT Hypercar gets up to inadvisable speeds in shockingly short order. At 4.5sec, the 0-100mph time is 0.8sec ahead of a regular Turbo S. Top speed is the same 205mph.

By this point, I am absolutely smitten with the GT Hypercar. Michael points out that if the lack of rear seats is holding you back, his team could accommodate your request, although that would mean ditching the half-rollcage and settling for a four- not six-point harnesses, although at least it means there's somewhere to stick your luggage – the boot is lost to aero ducting. Perfect. So all I need now is £600,000.

Anyone?

ALAN TAYLOR-JONES

First verdict

GT1-inspired looks and insane pace on track, yet still daily driveable. Masterful, if a bit on the expensive side

★★★★★

	PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
Data	£600,000 (plus donor car)	3745cc twin-turbo flat-six, eight-speed dual-clutch auto, all-wheel drive	907bhp @ 7300rpm, 738lb ft @ 4000rpm, 0-62mph 2.4sec, 205mph	1600kg (dry)	n/a mpg, n/a g/km CO2	Now

The Leaf has no pretensions to hot-hatchery and is all the better for it

New Mk3 Nissan Leaf leans towards crossoverkind

NISSAN LEAF

Plugged into today

Third time round, Nissan's reinvented Leaf is very 2025

When Nissan launched the first Leaf, electric cars were the preserve of eccentrics and evangelists. Since then the EV market has become larger and more mainstream, and so has the Leaf, which now finds itself as one of three current Nissan EVs, with another one just around the corner.

The Mk1 was brave and odd – a rolling experiment with eco-nerd charm – while the second was largely forgettable. The new Mk3 has the job of condensing all of Renault-Nissan's considerable EV know-how into a more mainstream package.

Based on the group's CMF-EV hardware, which you'll find under a Nissan Ariya and Renault Megane E-Tech, the new Leaf is shorter but taller than the outgoing model. It has echoes of the Tesla Model Y, and a Honda CRX-style rear end with light graphics that echo the old Nissan 300ZX.

The slippery 0.25 drag coefficient, with active cooling flaps and smooth underbody, helps eke out some extra miles per charge. Nissan quotes a range of 271 miles for the smaller 52kWh battery and 386 with the larger 75kWh unit. Built in Sunderland and powered by British-made batteries, this is as close as we get to a home-grown electric car.

Charging performance is competitive: up to 150kW DC on the bigger battery, giving a 10-80 per cent top-up in around half an hour, adding 273 miles, assuming you can find the right charger and your battery's warm enough. We got 3.7 miles per kilowatt hour in motorway use and 4.1 in gentler mixed driving – proof that Nissan's aero obsession and thermal management pay off.

Electric motor output is 174bhp on the 52kWh version or 215bhp on the 75kWh range-topper, both driving the front wheels only. Performance is well judged for a family EV, sprinting quietly from zero to 62mph in 8.3sec for the 52kWh car or 7.6sec for the 75kWh model. The Leaf has no pretensions to hot-hatchery and is all the better for it. It rides smoothly and handles neutrally enough, but the lasting impression for the driver is of peacefulness and calm. Just don't expect any thrills.

Interior has big screens and recycled fabrics

The cabin has joined the modern world. Twin 14.3-inch displays are crisp and responsive, underpinned by Google software. Recycled materials abound, and feel quite classy, with interesting textures and flashes of colour.

Higher-spec versions add a panoramic roof with adjustable opacity; a little LEAF logo casts its shadow onto the rear seats. Space is generous up front, though a little tighter in the rear. The 437-litre boot is adequate but no more, and there's no front luggage compartment to stow charging paraphernalia. Prices will start at around £33,000 for the smaller battery, or £36,000 for the 75kWh version. Production begins in Sunderland in late 2025.

The Leaf has successfully grown up in its third iteration. Gone is the whiff of experimental awkwardness and oddball character, replaced by crossover style, impressive efficiency, hushed refinement and slick infotainment. Nissan's once-weird electric hatch has become the normal one.

TIM POLLARD

First verdict

A Leaf attuned to European tastes, making good use of current technology, in a well-priced modern package

★★★★☆

THE FIRST HOUR

2 minutes
Leaf looks fresh and progressive – a car that buyers will be proud to be seen in

11 minutes
Glass roof fills cabin with light, but pinches rear headroom

29 minutes
It's eerily quiet in here – that 0.25 drag figure really makes a difference

42 minutes
Regen braking adjusts from gentle to one-pedal driving mode. Nice

58 minutes
Cameras are clear, comprehensive, make parking a doddle

PLUS

Decent range; hushed refinement; slick style; all-round polish

MINUS

Few thrills available here; boot not the biggest; no frunk

Data

PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
£36,000 (est, 75kWh)	75kWh battery, single e-motor, front-wheel drive	215bhp, 262lb ft, 7.6sec 0-62mph, 99mph	1937kg	4.5 miles per kWh, 386-mile range, 0g/km CO2	First UK deliveries February 2026

TOYOTA AYGO X HYBRID

Alternative future

A new petrol-engined city car? Turns out it can still be done

The petrol city car is dead in Europe, or so we're told. But it seems nobody mentioned it to Toyota, which has shifted 210,000 of its dinky Aygo X in just three years.

After Citroën and Peugeot deserted their city-car partnership with Toyota (remember the old C1/107/Aygo triplets?), the Japanese company went solo, introducing the Aygo X as a funkier crossover-inspired take on the city car.

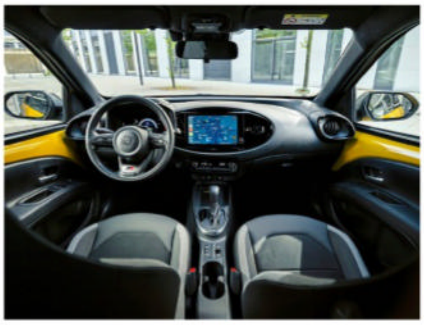
It's done well for a type of car that's supposedly on its knees. But it was held back by a weedy 1.0-litre petrol engine that needed thrashing to get any forward movement, and even then progress was no more than leisurely.

It made sense as someone's first – or last – car – but was rather compromised for anyone between. Toyota's answer is to squeeze in the 1.5-litre (non-plug-in) hybrid powertrain from the Yaris, which means all its cars in Europe (GR models and vans aside) are now electrified. The old 1.0-litre petrol will be retired when the models change over at the end of 2025.

Power rises from a paltry 71bhp to a much more useful 114bhp, shaving almost six seconds off the Aygo's 0-62mph time (9.2sec vs 14.9). I'm not sure any car has ever had such a performance glow-up, percentage wise, as part of an update.

The other key benefit of going hybrid is, of course, the running costs. The Aygo has never been thirsty, but 75mpg is now quite easily achievable and a quick look at the trip computer shows it's doing significant portions of the journey with the engine off. CO2 emissions of 85g/km are also the lowest of any new car in Europe that doesn't need plugging in.

Park your hopes of this being a warm hatch. It's nippy, yes, but somehow doesn't feel as brisk as a Yaris off the line. It's not the last word in refinement – but next to the old car, it's a transformation.


Minimal changes to neat, functional interior

Toyota calls today's test cars prototypes, but the truth is they're almost production ready bar a few rogue bits of interior trim and some slight whistling from a window seal on one car that's a bit more hand-built than the others.

The steering is light but well-judged for a car primarily aimed at urban use, though the increased performance and reduced engine noise mean it's far more suitable for motorway use than before.

There's a longer front overhang, to house the hybrid's larger engine. The bonnet, bumpers and lights are all new. In the cabin there's a new digital instrument cluster and redesigned centre console but it's otherwise business as usual.

For a car that's still less than 3.8 metres long it's impressive, but ultimately the Aygo X is cramped in row two; most adults would struggle to sit in the back, whereas they'd be fine for space in a Hyundai i10, for example. You'd also better hope your rear passengers don't suffer from claustrophobia, as the back windows are so small.

But the Aygo X is a welcome alternative to the notion that everything has to be an SUV and/or an EV.

TED WELFORD

First verdict

What a transformation. The hybrid engine is what the Aygo X should have had all along

★★★★☆

THE FIRST HOUR

2 minutes
Bold and bright colour palette. Nice to see

10 minutes
Quick lap of Berlin airport in the old car for context. So noisy and slow

25 minutes
Time for the new version. So smooth in comparison

40 minutes
Autobahn time. No need to fear a slip road in this new model

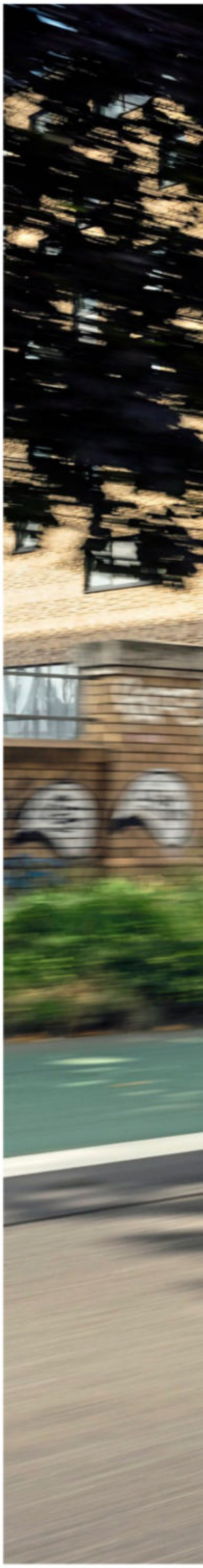
55 minutes
Quick check of the fuel economy: 80mpg! Wowzers

PLUS

Perky and stylish town transport

MINUS

Cramped and gloomy in the back



Data	PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
	£20,000 (est)	1490cc three-cylinder plus twin electric motors, CVT auto, front-drive	114bhp @ 5000rpm, 104lb ft @ 3800rpm, 9.2sec 0-62mph, 107mph	1090kg	76.4mpg, 85/km CO2	Late 2025

Bigger engine needs longer nose, but it's nicely done

It's not the last word in refinement – but a transformation next to the old car

Not so loud, but still plenty of presence

CHEVROLET CORVETTE E-RAY

Missing a spark

An electrified addition to the Corvette line-up aims to bring both more power and extra usability

The C8 Corvette is the most anti-Corvette Corvette ever. Even though the idea of shifting to a mid-engined layout had been in the air for decades, it still caused some controversy when the eighth generation was revealed with the engine behind the seats. The hot ZO6 variant went one step further, throwing out a conventional V8 for one that uses a flatplane crank, making it sound more like a McLaren or Ferrari than Corvette fans were used to. And now here's the Corvette E-Ray – the first one to use electric assistance. Sacrilege!

Like the Stingray and ZO6 it's an official UK car, available in right-hand drive from a handful of dealers, as a coupe or convertible, priced from just over £150k – more than the hybrid Porsche 911 GTS.

Corvette chief engineer Tony Roma tells me electrification was in the plan from the start of C8 development. 'Looking back almost 10 years ago, we knew electrification would become a bigger thing, as it has become for other cars,' he says, referring to European hotties including the Lamborghini Temerario, McLaren Artura and Ferrari 296 as well as the 911 GTS.

It was designed to have the extra electric elements in the transmission tunnel, as part of an overall aim of keeping it as close as possible to the rest of the range in look and feel. So the E-Ray doesn't have some of the features other manufacturers put on electrified variants, such as overtly aerodynamic wheels, blanked-off vents or coloured trim not found on other versions. Here you just get a small E-Ray badge on the side sills. It's a very flamboyant, shouty sports car, but none of that shouting is about its electrical assistance.

The engine remains unchanged from the basic Corvette Stingray. That means the combustion unit at the heart of the E-Ray is the LT2 'small block' 6.2-litre V8, sending 475bhp and 452lb ft to the rear wheels. It's supplemented by a 1.9kWh battery pack and 160bhp electric motor driving the fronts, ▶

Electrification was always in the plan, so it can stay close to the rest of the range in look and feel

THE FIRST HOUR

1 minute
Not many cars look so mean as you walk up to them

4 minutes
Oof! Firm seat base bolsters are punishing on the hips

12 minutes
The ride is properly sorted: controlled, well-damped and fluid

21 minutes
Eek – they weren't kidding about this using the wider body

34 minutes
Sounds good, but where's the performance…?

51 minutes
After pressing the long-travel throttle… FOUND IT

PLUS

Epic power; grip; impressive ride quality

MINUS

Feels oddly detached; worryingly wide; varying interior quality

Plasticky paddles but great instruments

Get ready to stretch that right leg if you want all 634bhp

Your only sign this is electrified

Where are the goosebumps? The fizz? Pointing the E-Ray towards the horizon should surely be more exciting than this

making the E-Ray all-wheel drive – another strike against Corvette habit. Chevrolet claims a combined system output of 634bhp, good for a 2.9sec 0-62mph sprint and a 180mph top speed.

Although the peak outputs are close to the ZO6, the aim is for it to be less sports car, more GT – 'a long-range cruiser' reckons Roma. 'People who already have one in the US are bragging how many states they visit when they go on long road trips.'

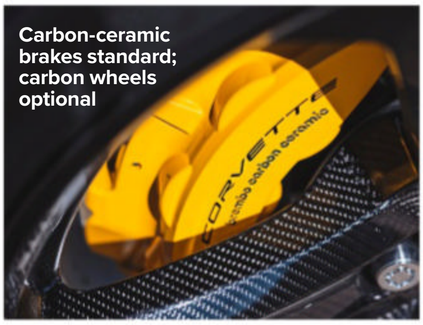
As well as increasing the distance it can travel between stops, electrification also makes the E-Ray more neighbour-friendly. There's Stealth mode, an engine-off start procedure. There is also Shuttle mode that allows engine-off movement at low speeds for short distances. But most of the time, the E-Ray's engine remains on.

Inside, like other current Corvettes it has a prominent vertical column of buttons (although they won't continue for the 2026 model year), a dated-looking infotainment screen angled towards the driver and a very intricate and detailed instrument cluster.

You don't get a great view out of the rear window, so there's a rear-view camera that feeds a screen located where there would normally be the central rear-view mirror. You'll be using the side mirrors a lot, too; E-Rays use Corvette's wider body, which is quite a snug fit on English country lanes and village streets. Frankly, I've never used the side mirrors in a car more than in the E-Ray, nervous not to kerb the optional £9460 carbon wheels fitted to our test car (an option that's necessary to unlock the 180mph top speed).

We also have optional Competition seats, with side bolsters on the base that are so punishingly firm and tight you'd have to be a slim-hipped racing driver to be comfortable. What was that about the E-Ray being more usable?

You can't deny the E-Ray's power benefits, though. Having 634bhp available is pretty exciting, once you get used to the way it's modulated by the E-Ray's long-travel accelerator pedal. Out on a good road and in Sport mode, I initially wonder where that extra power had gone. But that's before I realise just how long the throttle travel is. The E-Ray wants you to mean it: you really do have to put your foot down if you want all the potential. When you do, an explosive surge that never really lets up is the result; the V8 snarling in a chorus with a whining electric motor. It's quite a lot to take in.



Carbon-ceramic brakes standard; carbon wheels optional

What also impresses is the ride quality. Even in Sport mode, the MagneRide adaptive damper set-up is pliant and forgiving over coarse B-roads and yet can control the E-Ray impressively well when you want to get aggressive. Some European supercar makers could learn from this.

So... where are the goosebumps? The fizz? Pointing the E-Ray towards the horizon should surely be more exciting than this.

The issue is that the powertrain feels a little disjointed. Despite the E-Ray hurling you forward at an extreme pace, the steering – although accurate – has a numbness that makes you feel one step removed from everything going on. And the downside of that impressively tuned suspension is that it distances you slightly from exactly what's going on where the car meets the road.

A supercar with more than 600bhp should communicate via the seat of your pants and fingertip tingles, but the E-Ray seems keener to tell you what's going on via telegram. Gearshifts are impeccably smooth, with the e-motor filling in torque gaps, but that means there's less feeling of progression as the speed builds. It doesn't help that the paddles have a plasticky feel.

I was fortunate enough to try both a ZO6 and a regular Stingray back to back with the E-Ray and I came away thinking the electrified Corvette is the weakest of the three. The ZO6 is gloriously raw, unforgiving and fierce. The Stingray is engaging and light on its toes.

The E-Ray does a lot right: it's quick, it rides like a dream and it gives you the confidence to exploit that power. But if it were my money, I'd still choose the Stingray.

JAKE GROVES

First verdict

Stupidly quick, rides well and has plenty of that US charm. But the best Corvette, it seems, is the simplest

★★★☆☆

Data

PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
£153,440	6162cc 16v V8 plus e-motor, eight-speed dual-clutch auto, all-wheel drive	634bhp @ 6450rpm, 595lb ft @ 4500rpm, 2.9sec 0-62mph, 180mph	1919kg	22.4mpg (official), 7.9mpg (tested), 289g/km CO2	Now

Opinion

OLD AUDIS + TIMELESS RENAULTS + FUTURE RIVIANS

Handy features that make life better? Pah!

Letter of the month

Air your grievances

An 'odd' option that you can't see yourself using? The 'ventilate' tab that opens the windows an inch in the MG IM6 (First drives, October) sounds amazing! I would love a VW ID. Buzz but the stupid 'REAR' window button makes it a deal breaker. Yes, I am petty enough to not buy a car I like because of a window switch.

I think every car should have a California mode like the Fisker Ocean (drops the windows, opens the sunroof etc). Why don't more cars do this kind of thing?

Trev Bourner

Old glory

I went to the Goodwood Revival this year, for the first time in about a decade, and was particularly struck by a couple of things.

One is how much bigger it's got, which I'm sure is good from the point of view of making it financially viable, although it also makes the queues for an ice cream rather long.

The other is how good the car park was. There were all sorts of exotica and forgotten delights – Maseratis, Bentleys, Ford Escorts, mid-engined Renault Clios, and so many VW camper vans, to name just a few – and clearly they had all been driven there. Impressive as the vehicles inside the event were, there's something very heart-warming about seeing these non-concours older cars out in the wild.

Roy Weaver

Useful tech

With EVs and hybrids becoming increasingly common, how about *CAR* doing its own take on the best ways to deal with slippery conditions, such as a muddy field used for parking at a car boot sale or festival?

Turn the traction control off? Press the Eco button to reduce the power? I know it sounds a bit boring but it is a situation that we will all come up against at some point. Snow and ice too.

Jeffrey Smith

Interesting for those of us taught to drive in pre-ABS, pre-Hill Descent Control days, long before the dawn of the 1000bhp family EV. With something uber-competent like a Defender, the car will always cope if left to its own devices, but I can't believe that applies to everything. CO

Living with classics

An inspired letter by Eric Wilkinson ('Respect for tradition') in the September issue has prompted me to respond. Everything he says about Audi's lack of support for owners who cherish their cars and look after these legends is spot-on. I have owned 23 Audis over the years, but because of the difficulty in sourcing parts to keep some of the older ones on the road I have now decided to sell my collection.

Obtaining parts in the UK is challenging, so like Eric I went to Ingolstadt this year and was met with the same response, and I too have failed to make any headway with Audi Tradition, post Brexit.

I am now selling my two 1995 RS2s, my 2009 V10 S8 and 2007 (B7) RS4. I have simply given up. It has been a pleasure caring for these cars, driving them and showing them at various classic car meets, but time moves on and so have I.

I'm fortunate enough to have a couple of older Porsche, and in my experience their customer support and parts availability is awesome.

Alastair Waite

Just as well they rarely need parts

Keeping up

Omoda, Leapmotor, Denza, Cupra, BYD, etc… how's anyone supposed to keep track of the plethora of new brands and models with the current GBU, focused on the top five in every category, which are always the usual suspects? Bring back the comprehensive GBU and make this reader since 1972 happy again.

Frank Behlau

All you need

I've been reading with interest Mark Walton's praise for the Renault Clio over various long-term tests, along with your supermini group test late last year. I started my car life with a Clio and wondered if they really were still any good today. Having recently hired one in Spain, I was delighted to see how accurate your reviews are – it really is a car that delivers everything you need and nothing that you don't. A refreshing break from the heavy, oversized and over-complicated trend with cars today.

It took us less than a minute to connect wirelessly to Waze and Spotify, the air-con and main controls were operated by physical buttons, it was comfortable and a pleasure to drive. (For reference, my cars at home are a 2024 BMW i5 and a 1998 TVR Chimaera.) What a fine car this is and well done to Renault for continuing to perfect the formula in the small-car market.

Alex Hull

4 ever

Loved the Renault 4 meets the icons article in the October issue. I disagree with the downbeat conclusion about how La Regie's latest offering will be thought of in 30 years.

Sure, electric cars scare us with complexity now, but wasn't that the case 30-odd years ago with new-fangled fuel injection and ECU electronics? Today, cars from the '80s are still on the road, either surviving with original equipment that proved more durable than expected, or revived with off-the-shelf open-source replacement systems that also improve efficiency and performance.

I expect a 2025 R4 in 2050 may still be on its original parts, or sport a generic replacement battery pack half the size and weight, giving twice the range, bought for £500 on Amazon.

I think the emotion a driver of a classic car feels is based on the places it took you, the life events it was a part of, not burning dead dinosaur.

In 2050 *CAR* magazine will be eulogising the electric R4. Guaranteed.

Bevan Brookfield

See you in 25 years, Bevan

Hurry along now

The Rivian R3, as mentioned in your October issue, looks just right as far as I'm concerned, with those visual nods to various hatchbacks and rally cars, and a pleasingly unflashy choice of colour. Being electric it's no doubt bigger in real life than it appears in photos, but from what I read it seems not to be ridiculously oversized for everyday use.

On paper at least, this is a car designed to be good to drive, easy to live with, and able to fit into broader society. Nice.

The problem is that I first read about it in the spring of last year, and it still seems to be several years away from production. We keep reading about how quickly cars are being developed these days. Not the Rivian R3, it seems. Will I still be so enthusiastic in two or three years, or whenever it actually becomes available?

Compare and contrast with the great many new cars coming out of China and South Korea at the moment. Is it just that those cars are not being previewed so far in advance, thus avoiding this peculiar sense of delay? Or is it – credit where it's due – that those firms are well funded, well staffed and working very hard to get their new products to market as quickly as they can?

For now, I don't find myself drawn to those cars in the same way as I am the Rivian, although some of the Kias seem pretty close. It's surely only a matter of time before one of them bumps the R3 out of my thoughts. And that assumes the team at Rivian can continue to find the necessary funding to continue on their path, which looks like quite a challenge in the current US context.

Lee Cotter

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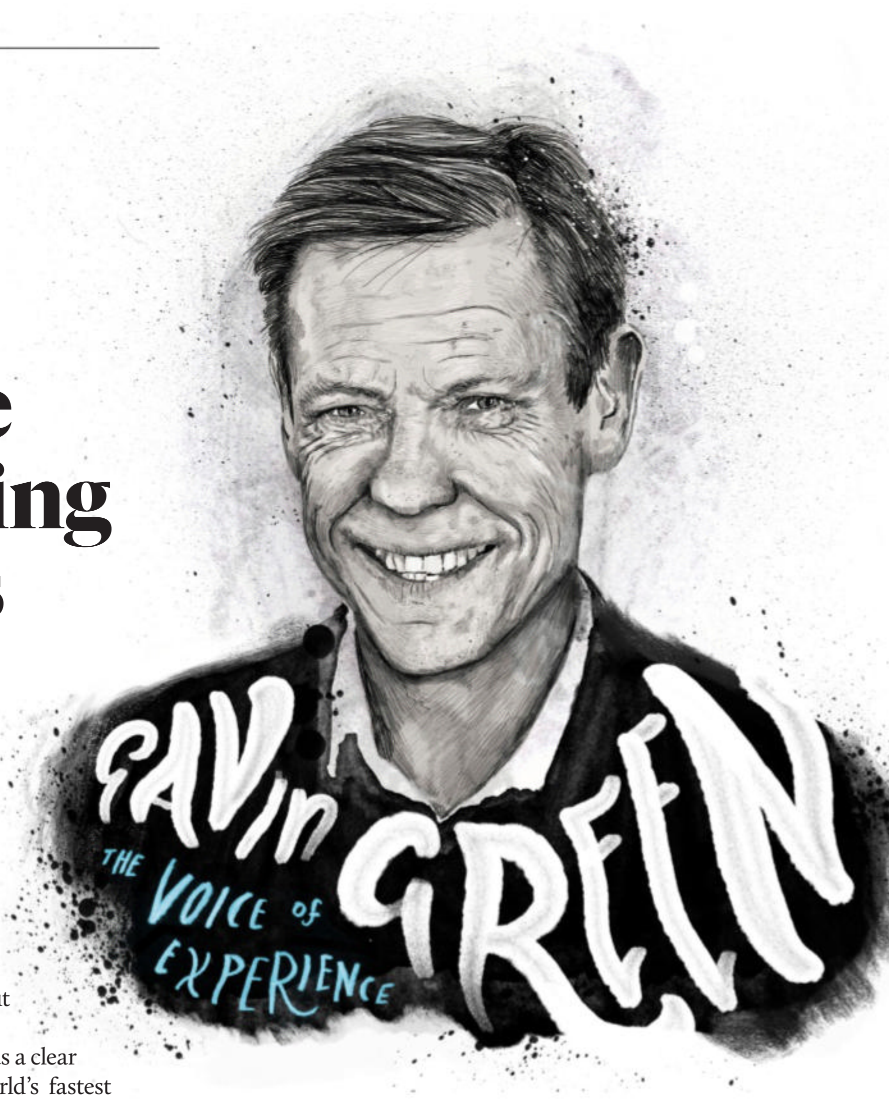
‘A high top speed was just a happy upshot of the game-changing McLaren F1’s excellence’



After a Yangwang U9 Xtreme sprinted to more than 300mph recently, claiming the title of ‘world’s fastest car’, I got thinking about some previous record holders.

Once upon a time, there was a clear advantage in driving the world’s fastest car. If you were in a Jaguar XK120 in the early ’50s, its 120mph top speed meant you’d arrive a lot quicker than the bloke in his Morris Minor, top speed 60mph.

Even after the fun stopped when the 70mph speed limit was introduced in 1965, there was some law-enforcement latitude: a fast car still meant a quicker journey. In the ’60s, beautiful and achingly desirable cars also were often the fastest. This was certainly true of the Lamborghini Miura, surely the pinnacle of supercar design. I drove an SV in the ’90s, but at nothing like its 175mph max.

In the late ’80s I did my fastest ever drive on a public road – just over 175mph near Stuttgart in what was then the world’s fastest car, the Porsche 959 (max speed 197mph). This car shrunk distances, especially if you lived in Germany.

When the Ferrari F40 nudged the record to just over 200 a year or so later, we celebrated – but mostly because the F40 was the most exciting Ferrari ever made. It still is. Its 201mph top speed was just one of the many performance tricks that made it so magical.

The last ‘fastest car in the world’ I liked was the McLaren F1, which could do more than 240mph. It was a game-changer that moved supercars to a new performance plane, partly because of its Formula 1 technology. Its priority was driving felicity. A high top speed was just a happy upshot of its excellence.

After all, there is no enjoyment in speed per se. Driving satisfaction comes from response and agility, from engagement and noise. Fun comes from feel, not figures. Things started to go wrong when supercars were designed to win headlines, not hearts. The Jaguar XJ220 was engineered to do 220mph, the fastest car in the world at the time (1992). I was at the Nardo test circuit in Italy when Martin Brundle, then Michael Schumacher’s F1 team-mate at Benetton, did just that. But apart from its top speed, the XJ220 had little to commend it. It was too big, too heavy.

The 253mph Bugatti Veyron was engineered to be the fastest production car in the world when launched in 2005. Although a technical tour de force, VW boss Ferdinand Piëch’s 1.9-tonne four-wheel-drive vanity project wasn’t great to drive, however exhilarating its performance. It was a trophy car, not a driver’s car.

Since then, small makers such as America’s SSC and Sweden’s Koenigsegg have taken the top-speed honours. I have never driven their 250mph-plus hypercars, but any machine with upward of 1700bhp (the SSC Tuatara) from a twin-turbo V8 sounds impractical and terrifying.

Now the U9 Xtreme has elevated the production car speed record to 308.33mph, done on the long straight of the Papenburg test track in Germany. This is clearly irrelevant to any road application. The Yangwang has 3000bhp from four electric motors and lots of clever EV tech, including a 1200-volt architecture. It’s another example of China trying to rule the car world – increasingly successfully. BYD’s range now spreads from the cheap little Dolphin Surf mini to this very maxi Yangwang: from a Fiat Panda alternative to a car faster than any Ferrari.

The ‘fastest car in the world’ has changed from driver’s delight to engineering conceit. But even when high speed was usable, let me give a word of warning. One of the fastest road journeys of my life was as passenger to European editor Georg Kacher (no surprise!). It was 1988, and we were in a Porsche 959 on our way to Maranello to drive the new ‘fastest car in the world’, the F40. The speedo topped 160mph at times, and we averaged just under 100mph.

The trouble was, we arrived more than an hour and a half early and had to wait for our host to arrive. At least the coffee was good.

Former *CAR* editor Gavin Green, a veteran of the supercar wars of the ’90s, is now one of the world’s leading automotive commentators

Peter Strain

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‘What sets it apart is the attention to detail, helped by an ecosystem of aerospace suppliers’

MARK
WALTON
THE INCURABLE
ENTHUSIAST

Back on two wheels this month – and a reminder of why we all love engines. I flew to France to ride the reborn Brough Superior and take a tour of the factory. It’s a fascinating story. Back in the ’20s, the Brough Superior SS100 (it’s pronounced ‘bruff’ by the way) was known as the Rolls-Royce of motorcycles. Capable of 100mph, it was exquisitely made, outrageously expensive and one of the fastest machines in the world; the *Flying Scotsman* didn’t manage 100mph until 1934. Nowadays they’re mostly known for setting record prices at auctions (upwards of £300k) and for being the bike that killed Lawrence of Arabia. Not many brands use a customer’s death so enthusiastically.

I always thought Brough was the company name and Superior SS100 the model, but turns out the founder, George Brough, grew up watching his dad, William, build Brough motorcycles in a Nottingham factory. The company was successful but George got restless with his dad’s plodding designs and wanted to build something faster and sexier. Dad refused, so in 1919 George set up his own company, two streets away, and called it Brough Superior. Ouch. As generational rivalries go, that’s a Greek tragedy with handlebars.

Anyway, Brough Superior dissolved in 1940 when the factory was converted to make Spitfire parts – and if this story has been quintessentially British so far, it’s about to get ridiculously international. Fast forward to 2007 and Mark Upham, a British bike collector based in Austria, learns that the Brough Superior name is up for sale in the USA. Upham buys the rights and turns to French bike designer Thierry Henriette to bring the brand back to life. The result is a new SS100, launched in 2013, a kind of steam-punk modern imagining of the original. Henriette later bought the rights from Upham and, with business partner Albert Castaigne, built a small factory in Toulouse, turning out a couple of bikes a week.

So like the original the new SS100 is low-volume and ridiculously expensive (around £70k a pop). But apart from the price and the gold logo on the tank, the thing that really sets this bike apart is the hand-made attention to detail. It’s no coincidence that the factory is in Toulouse, the home of Airbus, where a whole ecosystem of aerospace suppliers has grown up, specialising in alloys, carbon and titanium.

‘You should be able to place every component of the bike on a table and consider them to be both technically accomplished and beautiful,’ says Henriette, and up close you can see what he means. The engine block is machined from a 160kg solid billet into just 23kg of glinting, jewel-like magnesium alloy. The gears are by CIMA, which supplies Pagani and Koenigsegg; the minimalist frame is titanium; and the front suspension is a distinctive double-wishbone design, pioneered by Thierry’s friend Claude Fior in the ’80s.

So the retro looks disguise a bike that’s technically advanced – which is what led to the seemingly bizarre next step, a collaboration between Brough and Aston Martin. I say bizarre, because the resulting AMB 001 of 2019 looks like a cross between the *Alien* xenomorph and a *Tron* bike, light years away from the classic looks of the SS100. And this year, Brough announced another tie-up, this time with high-end watch brand Richard Mille. Again, the RMB 001 looks likes a two-wheeled robot insect – but beneath their carbon bodywork and sci-fi styling, both the Aston and Richard Mille bikes share a lot of components with the SS100, from the basic V-twin engine to a development of that clever front fork.

I walked round the Brough workshops like a squirrel in a peanut factory, drinking in the glinting components and the smell of oil. And then I got to ride an SS100. It’s like sitting on a giant mechanical heart, a throbbing and beating biological machine that’s alive with noise, vibration and heat. It’s not light and the handling is stiff, not agile, so it’s no sportsbike. But when you accelerate, that rhythmic blub-blub-blub noise thumps like hooves on a pavement and makes your skin go goosebumpy. And it made me think, aren’t internal-combustion engines just wonderful?

Editor-at-large Mark Walton loves Formula 1 through the ages, new cars, old cars, motorcycles, driving, riding and writing about it all

Peter Strain

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Mr Hall, February 2025

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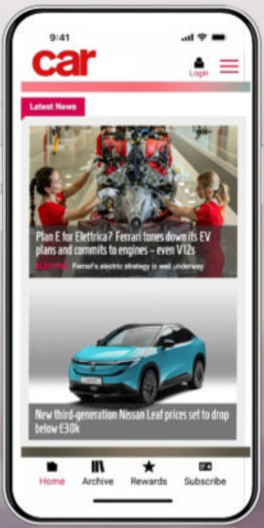
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REW

Porsche has hybridised the flagship 911 – and brought it back to life

Words James Dennison **Photography** Olgun Kordal

IRED

in the process, creating a thrillingly usable new performance car

Crest on steering wheel is in Turbonite

930 inspired the embossed logo on the seats

The added flexibility and near-instant response are more noticeable than the increase in power

Have we fallen out of love with the 911 Turbo S? As I prod the starter button for the first time in this latest 992.2 version, it's a question I'm seriously considering. Back in the '90s and 2000s, the 911 Turbo/Turbo S had an air of invincibility about it. The infallible all-rounder, the supercar slayer, the Top Trumps hero.

In recent years, however, there's been a shift. Turbochargers aren't as exotic any more. Most cars with an engine have them, and Porsche isn't averse to using Turbo as a badge on cars without an engine, let alone a turbocharger. In 2025, it's all about natural aspiration. The screaming 4.0-litre in the GT3 and GT3 RS has well and truly stolen our hearts – and for good reason. Who knows how long Porsche can continue to produce such wonders as the regulatory net closes in…

All of which may well have contributed to Porsche feeling it had to do something extra special with this new 992.2 version of the Turbo S. Rather than the usual evolutionary approach to developing the outgoing version, this £199,100 newcomer comes accompanied by some on-paper figures that look pretty revolutionary. Over 700bhp peak output, for a start, and a Nürburgring lap time 14 seconds faster – *14 seconds* – than its predecessor. Deeply impressive – but does it come at the cost of everyday usability, the cornerstone of the Turbo S?

That I will find out in a few hours. But my time with the car starts at the Ascari circuit in the Andalucian mountains. Its wide-open tarmac turns bathed in endlessly reliable sun mean this feels a long way from the Nürburgring, but there's ample scope for discovering exactly how the newly hybridised Turbo S handles the track element of its wide-ranging brief.

That T-Hybrid system is based on the one first seen in the Carrera GTS, and represents the second stage of a technology that clearly had a lot more to give. Unlike Bentley and Ferrari rivals, it's a mild hybrid rather than a plug-in, which would have been too heavy, according to Porsche. It uses a 216-cell 1.9kWh battery. Factor in the e-motor integrated into the eight-speed PDK gearbox and the electrification element adds 81bhp and 139lb ft of torque.

While the 911 GTS uses a single electric turbocharger, the Turbo S gets two smaller units, mounted low either side of the 3.6-litre flat-six engine. On the GTS, the compressor wheel and turbine wheel measure 83mm and 80mm respectively, whereas on the Turbo S they are 73mm and 65mm, allowing the electric motors to spin even faster – 145,000rpm versus 120,000rpm.

Total system output is 701bhp and 590lb ft of torque, helped by the combustion engine itself being upgraded with a lighter valvetrain and crankcase, as well as new pistons and a different compression ratio. Because the electric motors can whip the turbos up regardless of engine speed, peak torque is spread all the way from 2300rpm to 6000rpm (improved from 2500rpm to 4000rpm in the 992.1 Turbo S).

It's this added flexibility that's more noticeable than the increase in power. Out of Gachot (a slow left-hander named after ex-F1 driver Bertrand Gachot, whose imprisonment in 1991 after a road-rage incident inadvertently boosted the career of Michael Schumacher), I go for the accelerator and, rather than the brief pause a 911 Turbo veteran would expect, there's a near-instant response. ▶

Heavier, but the weight is very well disguised

turbo S
S GO 4303

Active aero reduces drag by 10 per cent

HOW IT GOT SO QUICK

Improvements in Nürburgring lap times tend to be measured in fractions of a second. Yet Porsche clipped a whole 14 seconds from the 992.2's time compared to the predecessor 992.1's best. How?

Jörg Bergmeister is the former racer, now Porsche ambassador, who set the monster time. We ask him where the improvement came from.

'Basically everywhere. One thing that stands out is the power, but it's not only that – there's the driveability. You're not driving it like a turbocharged car any more. The instant throttle response means you drive it more like a naturally-aspirated 911, and therefore you can position and steer the car a lot better on the throttle. Also, the ehPDCC [Porsche's dynamic chassis control system] is more refined, more agile. And the wider tyre on the rear definitely helped us.'

At 12.9 miles, it's a far longer lap than most, so how does the rubber hold up? 'You definitely need to manage them on the Nordschleife because we are running the camber like the road car. Obviously, if we put a lot more camber in then the limiting factor wouldn't be the outside shoulder so much.'

The car he used for the quick lap wasn't entirely standard, as it had a rollcage and race seat fitted. 'It's definitely not a performance enhancement,' says Bergmeister. 'The centre of gravity is higher with a cage. But as we are going a lot quicker than the racecars through a lot of the sections I like to have the safety.' Coming through Schwedenkreuz the Turbo S is hitting 180mph, where a 911 GT3 R (the race version) is often around 165mph.

The headlines only tell part of the story. Even someone of Bergmeister's talent and experience doesn't always do perfect laps, sometimes trying too hard.

'That happens very often when you're really going for it.' He recalls the day when, with Porsche GT boss Andreas Preuninger supervising, he was trying to set a time in the GT3 RS. He'd clocked 6min 50.6sec, but he knew there was more potential.

'Especially with that much downforce you can take more risks, but there are still consequences on the Nordschleife. In the end we went another second quicker [6min 49.328sec], although I had places where I lost two-tenths because I over pushed a little bit.'

Turbo S
S GO 4303

Wider and vented rear wheelarches show it's a Turbo

With a brilliant driving position and excellent view out, the Turbo S never feels awkward or ungainly

It's not as crisp as the GT3's naturally-aspirated unit, but it's far closer than you expect forced induction to be. The PDK 'box, too, is not as sharp or responsive, but then again you're less inclined to use it given the torque on tap from little more than idle.

Comparisons to the GT3 are unfair, but at many circuits the Turbo S would likely be quicker around a single lap thanks to the sheer power on tap; 0-62mph takes 2.5sec, 0-100mph takes 5.5. Around the 'Ring, however, the extra weight (up 85kg on the previous Turbo S) means it can't match a GT3, but the advances in power and aero make it way quicker than the car it replaces.

There's additional active aero in the shape of a new front diffuser, contributing to a reduction of overall drag by 10 per cent, while the tyres (Pirelli P-Zero Rs in this case) are more adept at controlling temperatures and 10mm wider at the rear. The carbon-ceramic brakes are the largest Porsche has ever fitted to a two-door production car. At the front they're 420mm in diameter, with 10-piston calipers, while at the rear 410mm discs are mated with four-piston calipers.

Those upgrades all play a part, but it's the hybrid system that's the game-changer. Utilising a 400-volt architecture, the Turbo S features the debut of an electro-hydraulic version of Porsche's dynamic chassis control system (ehPDCC), whereby the active anti-roll bars generate countering forces to keep the car as balanced as possible.

In action, the results of ehPDCC create an intriguing contrast. The ability to maintain body control belies the softer feel of the Turbo S, which has MacPherson strut front suspension, rather than the double wishbones used on current 911 GT models, and the effect is a more languid, less connected front end.

The car's balance is utterly superb and brilliant fun, though. Flick to the right then to the left, induce understeer, get on the power and – hey presto – you've got a proper drift machine. And guess what? That throttle response means it's way easier to balance the slide with power than in any previous Turbo S.

In truth, the playful tyre shredding feels like it suits the car more than a balls-to-the-wall hot lap. I try it, once, and the results are formidable, but I don't feel the need to go again. Like a watch that will work down to 400 metres, I enjoy the idea that it can deliver such feats yet I don't want to test it repeatedly.

No, I'm more interested in what the Turbo S is like away from the confines of Ascari, out in the real world where, Porsche says, the vast majority of Turbo S drivers have their fun. Exiting left out of Ascari's dramatically huge front gate, the wireless CarPlay navigation is directing me towards Ronda, then south towards the Costa del Sol. Classic Turbo S heartland – in my mind, at least.

It soon reveals itself to be remarkably easy to place on the road. Cars with this level of performance are often difficult to drive on public roads, with their poor visibility and hulking great width. The Turbo S, at 1900mm across without mirrors, is merely 13mm wider than a BMW M2. It's by no means narrow, but factor in the brilliant driving position plus excellent view out and the Turbo S never feels awkward or ungainly.

While it's tempting to take the Turbo S for a lap of Ronda, time is of the essence, so I press on down the A-366 south-east into the Sierra ▶

PORSCHE 911 TURBO S

PRICE £199,100
POWERTRAIN 3591cc twin-turbo flat-six, 1.9kWh battery, e-motor, eight-speed dual-clutch auto, all-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE 701bhp @ 6500rpm, 590lb ft @ 2300rpm, 2.5sec 0-62mph, 200mph
WEIGHT 1725kg
EFFICIENCY 24.4mpg (official), 21mpg (tested), 262g/km CO2
ON SALE Now
★★★★★

WATCH THE VIDEO!
GET *CAR*'S DIGITAL EDITION – SEE PAGE 54

de la Nieves mountains. Locals used to collect winter snow and store it in pits, some of which can still be found today, then use it for cooling during warmer months. Right now, however, the Porsche's dual-zone climate control is doing the heavy lifting as the road meanders aggressively through the exposed limestone outcrops. Even with the drive mode set to Sport and ehPDCC in a firmer preset, the ride quality of the Turbo S is quite outstanding. Tyre noise has been reduced, while only a squeak of wind noise from the driver's side mirror lets the side down slightly.

Out from the shadow of a towering peak and into the brilliant autumn sun, a long switchback left hoves into view and focuses the mind. Right foot pivoting to the brake pedal, there's plenty of feel, even when the brakes are cold, and the stopping power is ferocious. The steering wheel also offers vivid communication, ensuring the driver is well aware of the level of grip and the state of the road surface.

On the road, even heavy-handed inputs are masked by the ehPDCC and rear-wheel steering keeping everything composed and pointing in the right direction. Settle things down and you'll find it's easy to build up a rhythm, with third gear enough to get you into and out of most corners.

However, while the powertrain is formidably potent and responsive, there are times when it leaves me cold. That's not helped by a new titanium sports exhaust system (saving 6.8kg) fitted as standard on the Turbo S. As with the hybrid engine in the GTS, the low, deep sound seems a little too heavily synthesised for my liking, at least when heard inside the car. Thankfully there are still some boosty annotations to the soundtrack, although the overall theatre falls short. Thus far, in both the GTS and the Turbo S, the T-Hybrid flat-six is a touch too clinical at the expense of character.

My progress is stunted by a slow-moving Renault Scenic just south of Yunquera. Possibly blue at some point its life, it now wears the dusty, destructive patina of many an Andalucian summer in the mountains, yet its driver (arm out the window, faded chequered shirt rolled to the elbow) is driving it like a teenager with a black box logging their every move.

Eyeing up an overtake, my view ahead dappled by the Spanish fir trees lining the straightening road, I hit the red Sport Response button, swing out to the left and fire past – all in one fluid and devastatingly rapid movement. It's hard not to raise a smile at such acceleration and it's equally easy to argue that hybridisation has indeed broadened the bandwidth of this car. Yet it's not fleeting moments of exhilaration that truly explain the desirability of the Turbo S.

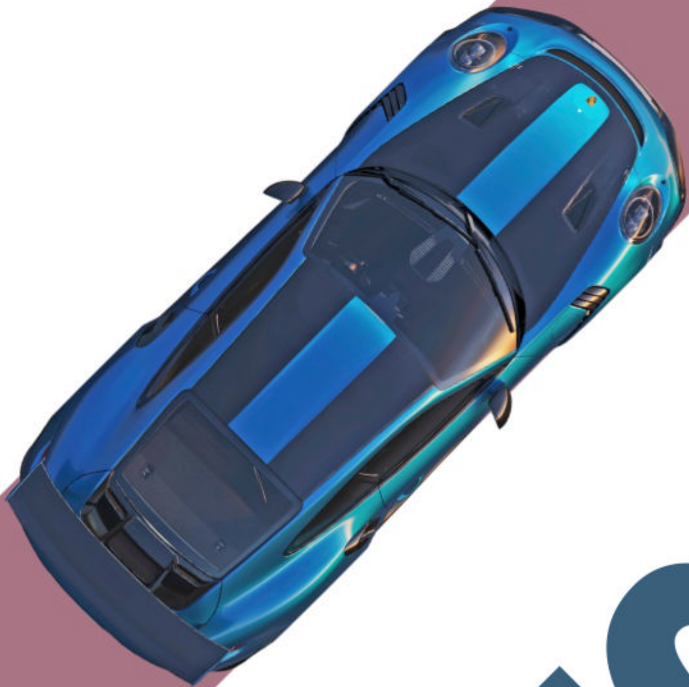
For absolute thrills, many current 911s will do a better job. GT3, GT3 RS, Carrera T even – they're all higher on the 'one last drive' list than a Turbo S will ever be. But while setting a seven-minute lap time at the Nürburgring certainly isn't easy, it pales into insignificance next to what else the Turbo S can do.

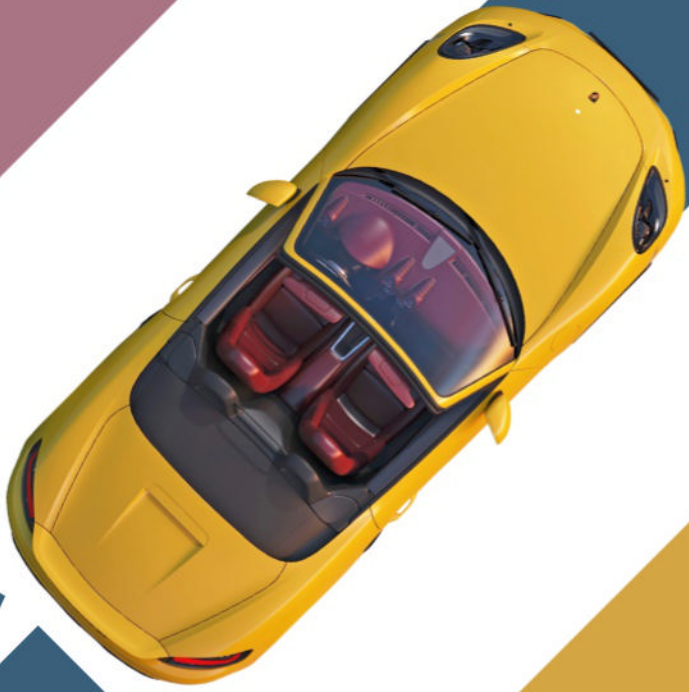
That's because making a track car is one thing but combining it with this sort of genuine, unfussy usability is just about the hardest trick to pull off. There's a reason you're unlikely to see the Aston Martin Vantage or Ferrari Amalfi appear anywhere near the Turbo S on a lap time leader board, any more than you're likely to see a Radical being driven regularly on a soaking wet British motorway. They're two extremes, at opposite ends of the scale, and never have these two sets of talents come together in one car quite so convincingly as they do in a 911 Turbo S.

turbo S
4303

New pads grip standard ceramic composite discs

In both this and the GTS, the T-Hybrid flat-six is a touch too clinical at the expense of character





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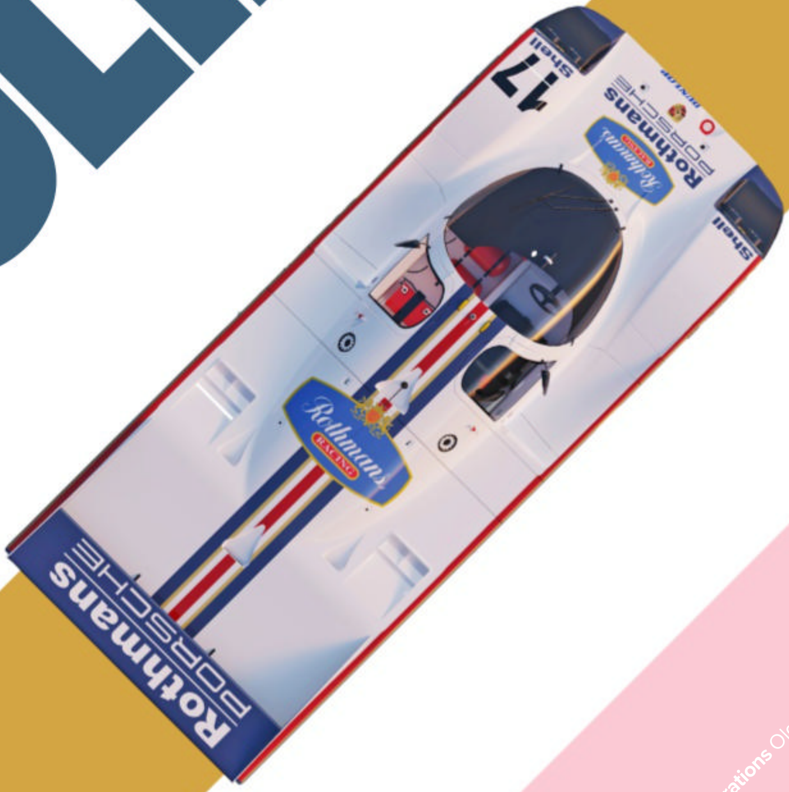
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Rothmans PORSCHE
Rothmans RACING
Rothmans PORSCHE
Shell

Illustrations Olgun Kordal

THE BOOST

Being fired through time and space by a turbocharged Porsche engine is one of life's great pleasures. We salute the best of the breed

911 TURBO (930, 1975-1989)

THE TURBO TRAILBLAZER

This is it. The homologation special that became an icon. The high-performance Porsche that came to symbolise '80s excess to such a degree that it was, for quite some time afterwards, about as fashionable as a Technicolor shell suit. The 930 has an extraordinary legacy – particularly for a car with atrocious timing.

Porsche wasn't long into corporate governance away from the family when new CEO Ernst Fuhrmann decided the firm's next homologation special after the 2.7 and 3.0 RS models would feature the turbocharging technology then decimating rivals in the prestigious Can-Am series. The days of near-limitless expenditure at Zuffenhausen were rapidly drawing to a close, but production-based motorsport was still seen as a noble and effective way to improve both the breed and sales. With all-new motorsport rules on the horizon, the stage was set.

Should the new car be a pared-back, lightweight road racer like the 2.7 RS? No. Fuhrmann wanted luxury, refinement, power and speed – lots and lots of speed. A true flagship, then, for Porsche's wealthiest clientele. Then, just as this thirsty brute of a supercar was ready to launch, the OPEC oil crisis made it look like a car out of time. The profligate new Porsche met with considerable resistance across the political spectrum.

Nevertheless, Fuhrmann persevered. Wide across the rear arches and with the 'whale tail' wing in pride of place, it looked spectacular. Although detuned to 260bhp amid fears it might prove very easy to crash, it was still arguably the quickest thing on the road at the time. And unlike extravagant Italian rivals it could deliver that performance wherever and whenever you wanted it. It was an entirely different kind of supercar.

The 3.3-litre version arrived in '78, 'tea tray' replacing the 'whale' on account of the wing's pronounced outer lip. An intercooler and the increased displacement pushed power to 296bhp. There were brakes taken from the 917 racer and a stronger, quieter clutch, too, although the latter pushed the now weightier powerplant slightly further rearwards. Faster, heavier and more refined, that's how the Turbo largely stayed until a decade later, when it gained a five-speed gearbox.

With a single large turbocharger and low compression, the Turbo is disarmingly slothful off boost. With unassisted steering, no ABS and usually just four gears, not to mention all the quirks of the original 911, such as floor-mounted pedals, it's a culture shock to the uninitiated. Effectively it's two cars in one; docile off boost, all distant, deep-chested rumble and latent menace, and then long, elastic slugs of potent acceleration when the turbine is spinning properly. Tapping into anything like its full potential on wet roads is an engrossing exercise in extreme judgement and uncanny anticipation.

ADAM TOWLER

turbo
PORSCHE

Tea tray, not whale tail. And 3.3 litres of 'fun'

911 TURBO

Synonymous with the word ‘turbo’, and an icon of excess

POWERTRAIN

3299cc turbocharged flat-six, four-speed manual, rear-wheel drive

PERFORMANCE

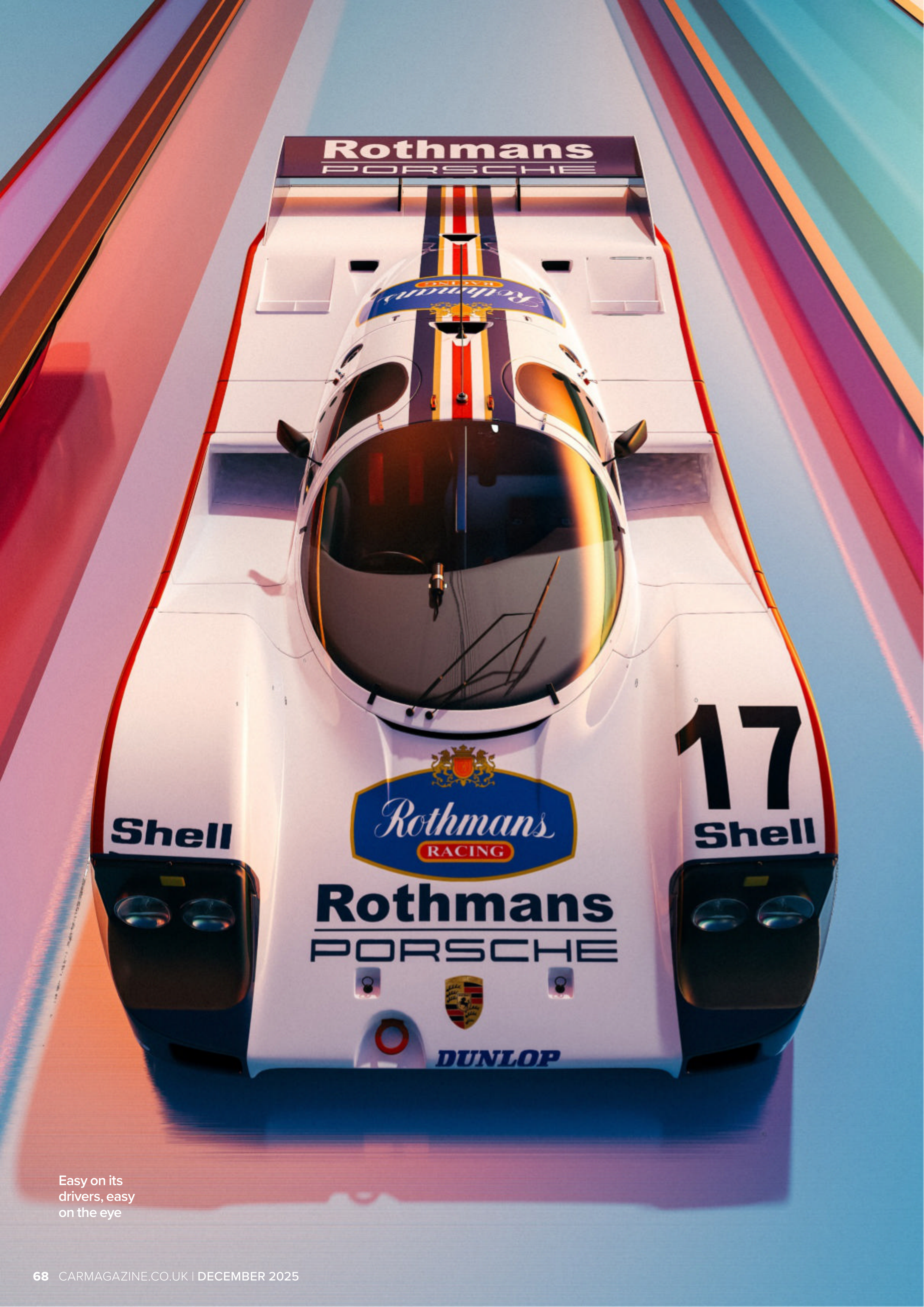
296bhp @ 5500rpm, 317lb ft @ 4400rpm, 5.1sec 0-62mph, 161mph

WEIGHT

1300kg

LEGACY

Invented the usable supercar – and sweaty palms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PORSCHE
DUNLOP

Easy on its drivers, easy on the eye

962C (1984-1988)

RACING IN A CHAMPAGNE SUPERNOVA

For all the awed whispers around the Porsche 962C – a car capable of doing 242mph down the Mulsanne straight, let's not forget – starting it is remarkably ordinary. You insert a key and twist. And even then it's not an especially grand key; just plain stainless steel, it wouldn't look out of place dangling from a garden-shed padlock.

The juxtaposition between the mundanity of that process and the machine itself is stark, because few racing cars can match the win rate of the 962 (and the closely related 956).

Prior to 1970, Porsche had never won Le Mans outright. By the time the 962 won its last French endurance race as a works car, 17 years later, Zuffenhausen had achieved that feat 12 times. And six of those victories were down to this pair. Run by privateers and works teams alike, the 956 and 962 proved themselves blisteringly fast, awe-inspiringly reliable and easy to run across a whole host of race series.

The cars worked because they weren't over-thought or overwrought. Instead, they simply combined huge power with excellent aerodynamics. In contrast to the early 917s and their wayward aero, the 956 and 962 were sorted from the off thanks to a better understanding of ground effect. How much better? By the time Bernd Schneider was racing the car in 1990, he was taking Eau Rouge at Spa flat. That's a full nine years before anyone in F1 dared try the same.

My experience of the car came at a rain-flecked airfield with Derek Bell providing driving instructions through a pit-to-car radio. The 2.7-litre engine had twin KKK turbos, which, in the days before variable-vane technology, were somewhat boosty. Bell told me it went from 'something like 250bhp to 700bhp in that instant', which sharpens the senses, especially on cold slicks.

At first the Porsche felt like a complete handful, darting all over the place as it channelled my nerves, but with Bell's encouragement I increased the pace and all of a sudden a (relative) calm descended. The car I drove didn't have the twin-clutch PDK transmission (this revolutionary tech was tested on the 956 as far back as 1984), but if you snapped through the gearchanges fast enough you could keep the turbos spinning, the aero working and the car happy. From my talentless perspective, a vague vision began to emerge as to why the likes of Bell loved it so much. He told me it was a relaxing car to drive, and I can kind of see what he meant.

Much like its key, the 962 had zero fanfare. It was simply a machine focused on winning with minimal drama. Recognise that characteristic? It's still the Porsche way, all these years later.

PIERS WARD

Rothmans
PORSCHE
Shell
DUNLOP

Rothmans
PORSCHE

962C
Won just the 19 sportscar constructors' championships…
POWERTRAIN
2649cc twin-turbo flat-six, five-speed manual, rear-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE
650bhp @ 7600rpm, 487lb ft @ 5800rpm, n/a sec 0-62mph, 240mph-ish
WEIGHT
820kg
LEGACY
Cemented Porsche's reputation as a maker of very fast, very reliable performance cars

959 (1986-1993)

‘HI. I’M FROM THE FUTURE’

The 959 was one of those Eureka moments in Porsche history. A 911 turned up to 11 in the name of Group B competition, it scribed a new template for the sports car of the future: kevlar and aluminium, electronically-governed four-wheel drive and adaptive suspension to tame the twin-turbo flat-six. If 0-62mph in just 3.7sec sounds electrifying today, it was unheard of in the mid ’80s.

This most prescient of Porsches arrived well before philosophically similar machines like the Nissan GT-R and Mitsubishi Lancer Evo. A ballistic, road-legal R&D laboratory, it pioneered all-wheel drive and water-cooled tech for next-gen 911s, not to mention the 918 Spyder.

Ferrari’s contemporary F40 (co-star of our celebrated September 1987 cover, ‘There will never be another month like this’) felt old-school by comparison, relying on minimal mass, brutal V8 punch and balls of steel to compete. It did pip the 959 to the magical 200mph barrier, mind (the clever-clogs Porsche ran out of puff at 197mph).

When it was unveiled at the 1983 Frankfurt motor show as the Gruppe B concept, Porsche fans went into meltdown. The 200 deposits required for the homologation of the sleekest incarnation of 911-kind were swiftly placed. Excitement built when a 959 won the Paris-Dakar in 1986, but Group B laurels were never realised after the series was canned ahead of the 1987 season. It also raced, with less success, at Le Mans in ’86 and ’87.

The fiendish business of making a microproces-

sor-controlled race rocket road-ready meant there was a four-year wait for 959s wearing number plates, as Zuffenhausen's engineers worked to turn the blueprint into reality. Although production numbers swelled to 292, just 12 cars were registered in Britain at a cost of £155,266.

That flat-six engine was derived from the Porsche 956 endurance racer's, displacing 2849cc and breathing through four valves per cylinder, quad cams, a pair of sequential KKK turbos and twin air-to-air intercoolers. The net result was 444bhp and 370lb ft, and with weight capped at 1350kg on the rare lightweight Sport version. Little wonder *CAR*'s Gavin Green dubbed it 'the most advanced and fastest production road car ever made' when he delivered the first verdict 38 years ago, although there was a catch. 'In its determination to make the world's greatest road machine, Porsche has forgotten to involve the bloke behind the wheel.' Ah.

Drive one today and the 959 still dazzles and disorientates. It's a curious mix of regular G-series 911, with the usual seats and '80s steering wheel, elevated by the kind of technical wizardry that marks a once-in-a-generation disrupter. The computers adjusting torque distribution and dampers may be crude by modern standards, but the 959 still has a wicked turn of speed. If you're wondering who fired the first shots in the technological arms race that now defines the supercar, look no further.

TIM POLLARD

959

The antithesis of Ferrari's F40, the 959 was a rolling testbed for everything futuristic

POWERTRAIN
2849cc twin-turbocharged flat-six, six-speed manual, all-wheel drive

PERFORMANCE
444bhp @ 6500rpm, 370lb ft @ 5500rpm, 3.7sec 0-62mph, 197mph

WEIGHT
From 1350kg

LEGACY
Pioneered a new genre of more complex, active supercars

The best-looking bar of soap in history

944 TURBO (951, 1985-'88)
718 CAYMAN (2016-2025)

SMELLS LIKE UNDERDOG SPIRIT

Few cars scream '1985' more than an original Porsche 944 Turbo. The low, compact coupe, with its pop-up headlights, faired-in front end and wraparound rubber rear spoiler, simultaneously showed a new direction for performance motoring and also perfectly exposed Porsche's confused relationship at the time with its sports cars: why else would you design a driver's car so completely different to the 911, and then give it virtually identical power, performance and even price?

Such odd planning was partly due to the 964, the 3.2 Carrera's replacement, being significantly delayed, but it was also because a passion for four-cylinder sports cars is a thread that runs through the company from its inception – from 356 to Le Mans-winning 919 Hybrid.

The 944 Turbo did indeed look forwards. With full Motronic engine control, including knock sensor and catalyst, it was the first Porsche to be sold globally with one engine tune, its 217bhp and 243lb ft of torque enabling a top speed just shy of 160mph and a 0-62mph time under six seconds. And while it was the marque's most advanced car of the time, prior to the arrival of the 959, it was also based on a basic design nearly a decade old.

Moreover, it formed the basis of Porsche's first one-make racing series, a business model that has since gone on to launch the careers of many professional drivers, – and the creation of thousands of competition 911s.

To drive, it is a pragmatic car: logical, unemotional and competent at normal speeds. But that transaxle layout gives it sublime handling balance when you push on, and while the engine is laggy by modern standards, it still has a serious punch.

If the 944 Turbo had a weakness, it was the combination of high retail price and only four cylinders, competing directly against V12 Jaguars and six-cylinder BMW coupes, and that was never going to be an easy sell.

Exactly the same issue afflicted the 718 at launch in 2016. After 20 years of silky, naturally-aspirated sixes,

Not 911s, but both excellent in their own ways

Porsche felt compelled to reduce the Co2 of the Boxster and decided – a decision that proved controversial both inside and outside the company – to build an all-new turbocharged flat-four based on the new 3.0-litre twin-turbo flat-six in the second-gen 991 Carreras. So far, so good, and in regular 2.0-litre and 2.5-litre S trim the numbers were good, with 296bhp and 345bhp respectively.

What no one had quite foreseen was just how agricultural the new engine would sound, either chugging away on a cold start or labouring at low revs. Everybody adored the sound of a Subaru Impreza, but when it came to the 718, Porsche had somehow missed the target.

Yet most owners love them. Perhaps that's because you do get used to that soundtrack, or because the vastly improved midrange torque of the flat-four brings a whole new dimension to Boxster driving, whether that's effortless overtaking or kicking the tail out on a wet roundabout. Maybe it's because the 718 is a superb sports car in just about every other respect, or perhaps because, just like the beloved 944 Turbo, the fact that the 718 only has four cylinders but performs so well immediately gives it the air of the underdog. That helps build a healthy bond between owner and car. Which after all, is what owning a sports car is all about.

ADAM TOWLER

944 TURBO

A forced-induction trailblazer for Porsche

POWERTRAIN

2479cc turbocharged four-cylinder, five-speed manual, rear-wheel drive

PERFORMANCE

217bhp @ 5800rpm, 243lb ft @ 3500rpm, 5.9sec 0-62mph, 157mph

WEIGHT

1320kg

LEGACY

Erm, the 911 is the one that survived…

718 BOXSTER

The lighter, cheaper alternative

POWERTRAIN

1988cc turbocharged flat-four, six-speed manual, rear-wheel drive

PERFORMANCE

296bhp @ 6500rpm, 280lb ft @ 1950rpm, 5.1sec 0-62mph, 170mph

WEIGHT

1410kg

LEGACY

We're going to miss it when it's gone

911 GT2 (991.2, 2017-2019)

THE 691BHP UNICORN

Imagine a Turbo caught in the grip of a midlife crisis, simultaneously going all-in on its newfound passions for crossfit and hard drugs. More wings, more boost. Fewer driven wheels to help tame it. And a price that makes you suck air faster than the gaping holes in the front bumper can. That's the GT2. It's the fastest, most focused and most feared 911 in Porsche's line-up, and the fact that it's appeared there intermittently and fleetingly over the past 30 years only adds to the mythos.

Porsche has built five distinct GT2s since the badge made its debut on the 993-generation 911 in 1994, the name derived from the racing class Porsche later abandoned to focus on GT3. The GT2 lived on through subsequent generations, though; no longer a homologation special, but still plenty special. It picked up the RS suffix on 2010's 997 GT RS, justifying the letters with an 89bhp jump to 612bhp and a carbon-aided 70kg diet. And it still insisted you shift your own gears. Bonkers, no question, but nowhere near as fast or as complete as the car that came after.

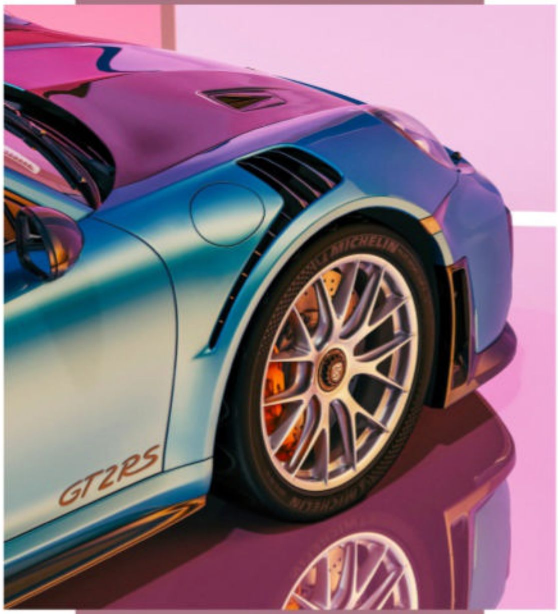
The 991.2 GT2 RS premiered at the 2017 Goodwood Festival of Speed, Porsche having made us wait six whole years and a facelift after the launch of the 991.1 Carrera and Carrera S. In public we whinged about the switch to PDK-only. Privately, ahead of actually getting behind the wheel, I'll admit to breathing a sigh of relief. Any car capable of lapping the Nürburgring in 6min 47.3sec – making it the record holder at that point – was probably going to keep me busy enough with two pedals.

It looked like a meaner GT3 RS, but the GT2 RS was a different animal to drive. Now with variable-geometry turbos and an extra 200cc over the 997 GT2 RS, the 991 pumped out 691bhp at 7000rpm and 553lb ft from just 2500rpm. Rev it or don't, it's absurdly fast either way.

I remember hitting 160mph on Silverstone's Hangar Straight knowing that there'd still be 51mph to go if not for Stowe. That and the faintly scary bassy thunder from the fat tailpipes. The lighter, unblown GT3 RS made a sweeter sound and was fractionally purer to drive. But with its full rose-jointed suspension the 2 RS is far more nuanced, far less the sledgehammer than you're expecting. Entirely driveable, too, right up to its sky-high limits. Widowmaker? That trope was dead and buried.

You'll pay £300k+ for a nice used one today, almost 50 per cent more than a new GT3 RS will set you back, because many fans still think it's the pinnacle of performance 911 development. But maybe not for much longer. The first new GT2 RS in almost a decade is on the horizon, this time with hybrid power and sure to make even the latest 701bhp Turbo S look tame. Yeah, about that widowmaker thing. You might just want to check your pension's transferable before you take the keys. **car**

CHRIS CHILTON



911 GT2 RS
One of the most fearsome 911s ever built
POWERTRAIN
3800cc turbocharged flat-six, seven-speed dual-clutch auto, rear-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE
691bhp @ 7000rpm, 553lb ft @ 2500rpm, 2.8sec 0-62mph, 211mph
WEIGHT
1470kg
LEGACY
Cemented the mythical status of the GT2

GT2RS
911 GB

Very, very fast. But also oddly friendly

KING OF THE WILD FRONTERA

The UK's highest frontier to its most northerly? Sounds like a job for the UK's next big-selling Vauxhall, the new Frontera

Words Ben Miller **Photography** Olgun Kordal

L20 VXL

The team in Mountain Warehouse have seen it all before, got the synthetic wicking T-shirts. We're obviously nervous and obviously clueless. You can see it in our inappropriate M&S food shop, nervous giggling and recent browsing history. (FYI, on the question of 'Is walking up Ben Nevis hard?', the internet is divided, obviously.)

'Do you have layers?' asks one assistant, smiling a concerned smile. No, why? The forecast's mild. 'That's at the bottom. Let's have a look at the summit... Yep, so, 40-50mph winds. Minus two degrees, feels like minus 13.' T-shirts any good? 'Not really. Cotton stays damp, and damp is cold. Do you have torches? Map and compass?'

Better, I suppose, that our credit cards meet with oblivion today than we do tomorrow.

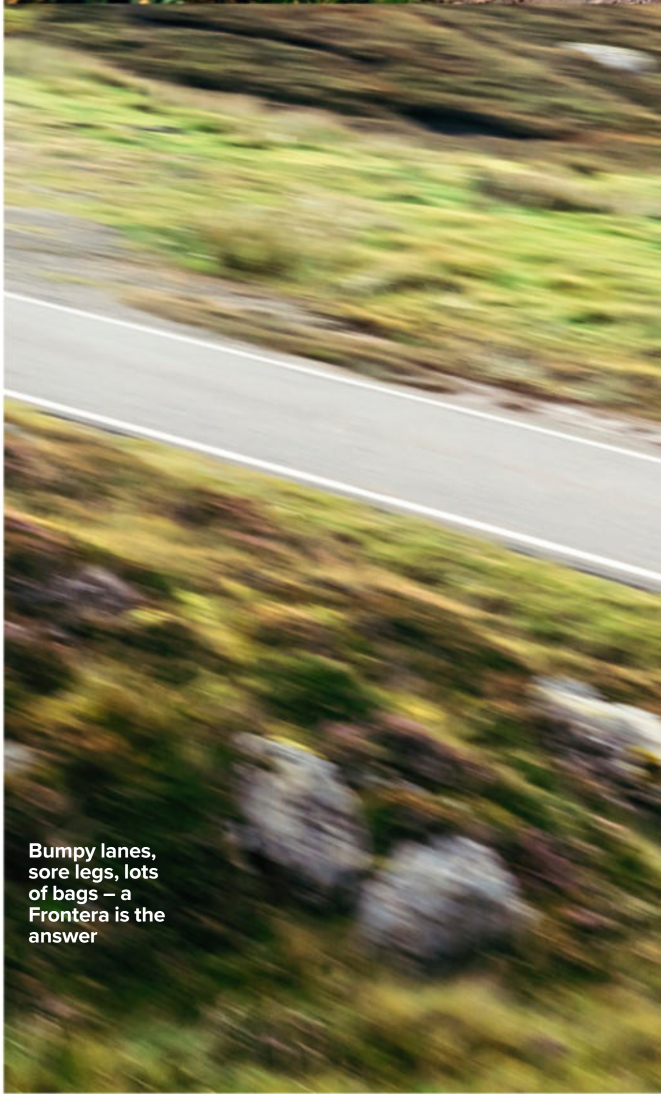
Fast forward to the next morning and it's near freezing as we drive to the bottom of the Mountain Track – the novice-friendly route up the UK's tallest peak – glad of the Frontera's space, easy comfort and lag-free heated seats. The sky's an inky purple, the peaks to the east dark against a brightening pre-dawn horizon. As we kit up and move out, trailing Nature Valley crumbs in our wake like Theseus' thread, the line of slumbering campervans in the car park is still silent.

Half an hour later, toiling uphill as the sun finally climbs above the ridge line, the track's weaving through glades, across bridges over roaring water and right through magnificent waterfalls. We can no longer hear anything of the world below, just the burbling of streams, the thumping of blood in our ears and the happy chatter of birds. Early on, you're hungry for progress reports; to know how far in you are. But soon, like settling into a long drive, you learn to relax and let go of the present, with its Strava data and 'Hey Siri' elevation checks. You enter a serene state defined only by the right here, right now. Your breathing, the movement of your feet across the world – these, together with the warmth of the sun on your face, are all that matter.

Eventually we leave even the hardy Highlands grass behind, the path – still obvious across the never-level expanse of scree – curving up into a mostly inorganic world of broken stone and patchy sky. The dazzling 30-mile views that for hours have dragged our gaze from the ground at our boots are gone, stolen by the blinding cloud. False summits come and go. The wind, bitingly cold and ruthless in its pursuit of gaps in your layers, never lets up, sculpting the cairns into abstract statues furred with frost.

And then, at last, the gradient lets up for the first time in five hours, levelling off onto a broad plateau bordered by gloomy crevasses, and we're there. There's a shelter on the top of a big cairn, an old observatory's ruined walls and a point 1344 metres above sea level. You'd have to travel more than 450 miles, east to the Scandinavian mountains, to be this high again with your feet on the ground. The endorphin-charged euphoria is present and correct, but tempered with anti-climax. Perhaps it's because the views are lost to the murk. Perhaps it's because the descent is little easier than the climb. Perhaps it's because it's freezing and no one remembered whisky.

Or perhaps it's because the job is only half done. After all, where do you go from the top of the United Kingdom – from a frontier of unrivalled otherworldliness, given its proximity to home? Where next if you still long to explore wild and empty hinterlands? Easy. You walk back down Ben Nevis, jump into a car named for extreme limits of land, and make your way to Aberdeen. From there, via no fewer than three ferries, you'd travel to Unst, the most northerly of Shetland's three main islands, and follow this adventure to the ▶



Bumpy lanes, sore legs, lots of bags – a Frontera is the answer

WE CAN NO LONGER HEAR ANYTHING OF THE WORLD BELOW, JUST THE BURBLING OF STREAMS AND THE THUMPING OF BLOOD IN OUR EARS

Worth Googling the old one before moaning it doesn't look like the old one

Some budget plastics, yes, but also a lot of space and common sense

UK's highest frontier with a journey to its most northerly – an even wilder place of mercurial weather, few souls and a lighthouse on a remote island called Muckle Flugga. If that doesn't scratch the itch, nothing will. And if the new Vauxhall Frontera proves equal to the task, then it surely deserves to wear the name.

Having started our climb just before 7am, it's gone noon before we drop out of the wind, out of the cloud and back into a world that feels like one in which you'd quite like to exist. The panoramic views are back, as is the feeling in our faces, and we're sky-high and smiling as we work our way back down the zigzags to the red burn, the Mountain Track's halfway point. By 1pm we're back at the lake. By 2pm we're sweating in the afternoon sun, losing layers and trying not to turn an ankle. And by 3pm we're back at the Frontera. Never has a car – seats, shelter, effortless autonomy and wireless CarPlay, bundled together for our convenience – looked so good. The sunshine turns to showers again but it's too late; we're safe from the elements, the weight's off our feet for the first time in eight hours and the Frontera's bearing our broken bodies directly from the UK's highest mountain to the nearest McDonald's drive thru.

If the Frontera name summons visions of a lacklustre 4x4 from the early '90s, well, you and me both. Great name, though, hence its return. Replacing the Crossland, the new Frontera sits on Stellantis' Smart Car platform (see also the excellent Fiat Grande Panda and Citroën C3, though the Frontera gets bespoke suspension and steering calibration) and arrived offering cost parity between its all-electric and mild hybrid powertrain options – a UK first at the time. Then the electric car grant made the EV even more affordable.

As befits its focus on value, the Frontera Electric has no drive modes, no battery pre-conditioning (not unusual at this price point; it's coming to the bigger Grandland) and a modest 44kWh battery (a 54kWh version is on the way, with a 249-mile WLTP range, more weight, no more power, superior efficiency and a £29,195 with-grant list price). Throw in a 100kW DC rapid charge ceiling and a 186-mile WLTP range and our 44kWh Frontera is not an obvious adventurer.

But the entry-level Frontera Electric costs just £22,495. The mid-tier GS is a £168 per month PCP proposition (with a 20 per cent deposit), complete with a £500 wallbox contribution and 10,000 miles of free home charging (a collab with energy provider Octopus). The 44kWh Frontera is the spiky bit on the end of Vauxhall's affordable EV spear. It's the version people are buying, a sweeter drive than its piston-engined sibling, and it will – like all big-selling Vauxhalls – become a part of the UK's landscape. Even in new Ultimate trim (heated steering wheel, heated screen and heated seats, plus LED fog lights and roof rails) it still comes in at just £25,695. Our car adds £650 Canyon Orange paint for a £26,345 total.

Performance is modest, space very generous. The single electric ▶

Ben Nevis
Achintee

Fresh, full of hope and legs that don't hurt

THE FRONTERA BEARS OUR BROKEN BODIES DIRECTLY TO THE NEAREST MCDONALD'S

Glencoe, neither shaken nor stirred

motor develops just 111bhp and 125lb ft of torque, and if that sounds tepid in a 1514kg crossover then you'd be right. Is it an issue? Not really. In the same way the Panda uses charm, instant torque and decent acceleration at real-world speeds to mask its on-paper lack of go, so the Vauxhall always feels fitter than its 12.8 second 0-62mph time and 88mph top speed would suggest. In town, on the motorway, whizzing through forests of pine – never do you feel under-gunned. And for a small-ish car the Frontera is big inside. The five-seat cabin is spacious in every seat, with plenty of legroom for second-row adults, and dropping the rear seats takes the 460-litre boot (bigger than a Golf or a Renault 4) to 1600 litres.

On the two-hour, post-hike drive to Pitlochry, the Frontera's easy pace and pliant ride – allied with the breathtaking Highlands scenery – transform what should be an exhausted slog into a relaxed and contemplative decompression. The steering – nicely weighted, light on feel but accurate – requires no conscious corrections as we cruise east, first on the A86 to Dalwhinnie and then the faster A9.

A Land Cruiser, er, cruises past on a stretch of dual carriageway and I find myself contemplating the theoretical trade, were it offered. A big part of the motor car's stranglehold on our imagination has always been its speed and stamina – just ask Tracy Chapman. So long as you can stay awake and fill the tank, you can keep moving. With stops for ferries and fuel, the Toyota could be in France by tomorrow morning, Spain by tomorrow night and Africa the following day. The Frontera's WLTP range is 186 miles on a full charge, but our real-world efficiency's hovering between 3.1 and 3.4 miles per kWh, suggesting an actual range of more like 140, perhaps 150 miles. Fair to say it'd take us a little longer to get to the souks of Marrakesh. But it surely makes more sense to choose a car based around what you'll do with it, rather than what you could but likely never will? (I know; tell that to anyone with a Rolex Submariner – safe to a depth of a 1000ft – but no PADI licence.) It's proving straightforward to keep the Frontera topped up, armed with the Electroverse app and RFID card. Cheap, too, with 11kWh charges

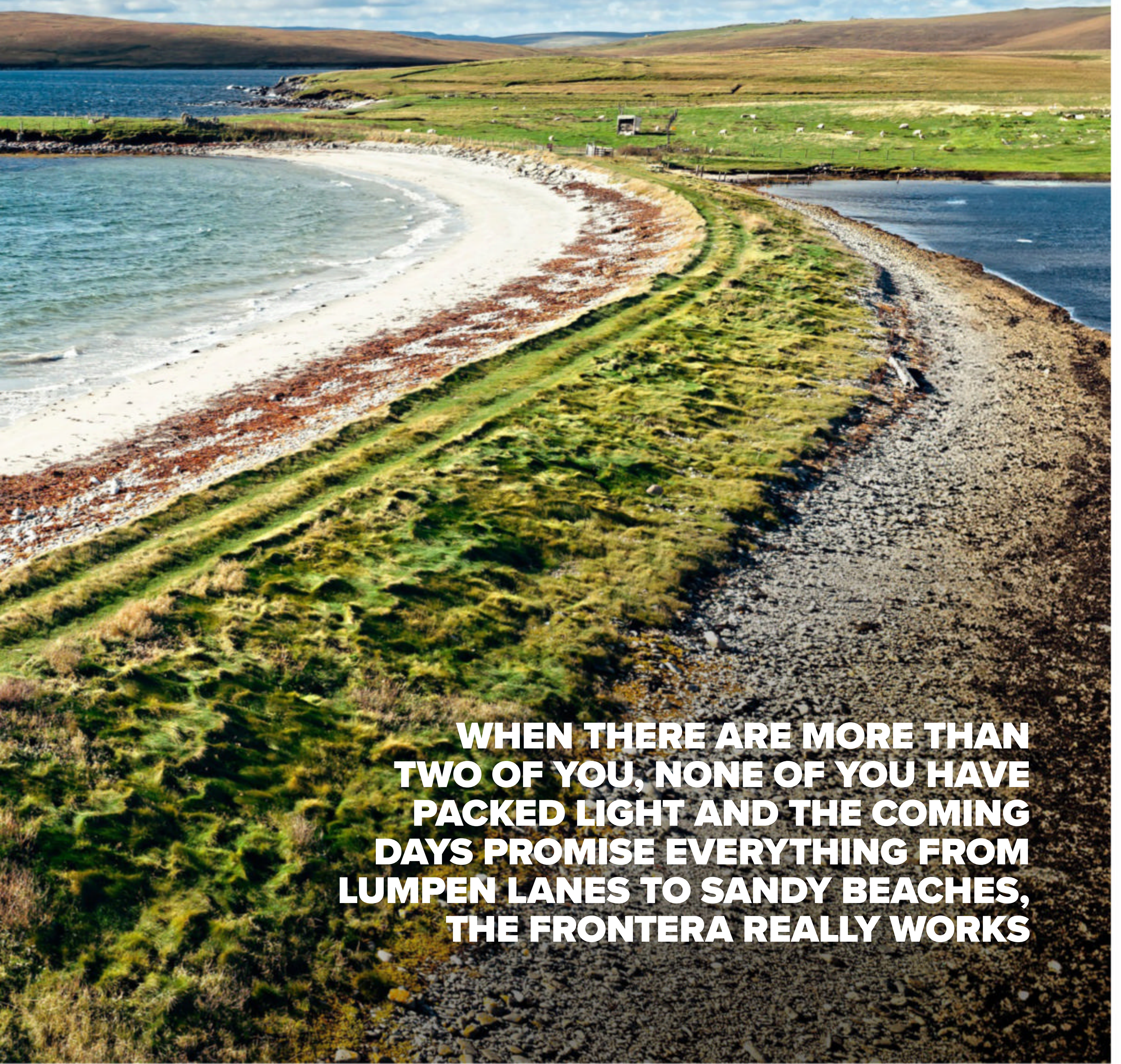
costing as little as £2.99. And where filling a Land Cruiser's tank might put a £120 dent in my credit card, tonight's charge to full will cost us precisely nothing on a Tesla destination charger.

A Porsche convoy is holding a nice pace along the old military road to Glenshee the next morning, slaloming between snow poles as we enjoy the scenic route to Aberdeen and the Shetland ferry. The views never let up in their IMAX-esque scale and wonder, and yet there is next to no one here. The ski station's cable cars run empty.

In the Frontera we've secured loose luggage (elasticated straps to hold cups of any size and shape help here, as does a rubber charging pad off which your phone is unlikely to skate, even when you're running with 911 GT3s), knocked off the air-con and temporarily put hypermiling on the back-burner. We haven't the Porsches' grunt or punch but neither is it difficult to cling to their coat tails, the Frontera's ready grip, easy steering and reassuring composure making short work of the climb into the Cairngorms. The stitched wheel feels good in my hands, the brake pedal is more convincingly resolved than on most cost-conscious EVs and the Bridgestones are unfussed whether the tarmac's wet or dry. Unusually, the Frontera defaults to the higher of its two regen levels, perhaps because that'll be the more efficient option in urban use. But prodding into free-wheeling Comfort feels better on these big, open curves.

Would a Renault 5 be more fun up here, for more or less the same money? It would. But we'd also likely be bored of the small boot, the cramped rear seats and the occasionally abrupt ride. When there are more than two of you, none of you have packed light and the coming days promise everything from scarred Aberdeen streets to rocky tracks, lumpen lanes to sandy beaches, the Frontera really works. Renault's 4 is the closer rival, of course, but even that struggles against the Vauxhall's combination of space and value.

The ferry from Aberdeen to Lerwick on Shetland's Mainland is reassuringly huge. We roll on, glide down a narrow ramp and are soon packed away in its bowels. The next morning we meet with Shetland-born Calum Grains, chief executive of the Lerwick Port ▶



WHEN THERE ARE MORE THAN TWO OF YOU, NONE OF YOU HAVE PACKED LIGHT AND THE COMING DAYS PROMISE EVERYTHING FROM LUMPEN LANES TO SANDY BEACHES, THE FRONTERA REALLY WORKS

Welcome to
ABERDEENSHIRE

It's a sign!

NEAR GLENSHEE THE VIEWS NEVER LET UP IN THEIR IMAX-ESQUE SCALE AND WONDER

Authority. Just as the Frontera offers mild hybrid or all-electric power, so Shetland sees opportunities in both the decommissioning of North Sea fossil fuel infrastructure and our renewable future.

'Shetland's been a part of North Sea oil and gas operations right back to the early stages, decades ago,' explains Grains. 'At Dales Voe [an ultra-deep-water quay just north of Lerwick] the water's 12.5 metres deep at the quayside, and the quay's strong enough to handle the structures being decommissioned; the biggest it's handled so far weighed 14,500 tonnes. These projects are a big opportunity for Shetland. There's a lot of equipment still to come out; equipment that'll need cleaning and recycling. Being an island is a huge advantage. We're close to the oil fields and we can ship the material straight from Lerwick directly onto the international metals market.'

Oil and gas may yet be at least a part of Shetland's future, however, as well as its past. Controversial Rosebank, the largest undeveloped oil and gas field in the North Sea, lies just 80 miles off Shetland. It holds an estimated 300 million barrels, and was green-lit by the UK government in 2023. A court subsequently ruled that approval unlawful, and the developer has re-submitted its assessment.

Several renewable projects are in their infancy, including offshore wind farms and green hydrogen production. A vast onshore farm, Viking Energy, began generating power from its 103 turbines last year. But for now energy remains expensive on Shetland – we see the price per kWh leap from 28p to between 46p and 59p on public chargers – and many locals resent the scale of the Viking Energy farm and its imposition on this otherwise timeless landscape, particularly when so much of its output leaves via a new sub-sea connector for mainland Scotland.

Clearly, it's a complicated picture. 'We have to be very careful to balance the needs of the community, the environment and industry,' continues Grains. 'That's quite a debate around Shetland right now. Everyone knows we can do it, but we've got to do it the right way.'

Our first inter-island ferry, from Mainland to Yell, is modestly sized, the boat from Yell to Unst smaller still. As you wait to sail you can look across the water to Unst: a 46-square-mile chunk of rock surrounded on three sides by thousands of square miles of water.

In moments we're on the move, sweeping up steep curves onto the island proper. The road, the A968, simply runs north, the expansive views on an entirely different scale to most in the UK. The sun and clouds paint shifting masterpieces on the windswept grasslands, the browns, greens and oranges daubed with a Pollockian energy that ▶

Squint and it's a bargain all-electric Discovery...

FRONTERA
L20 VXL

Did we mention Shetland was beautiful?

makes this landscape feel anything but static. A gusty breeze toys with the Frontera's seals and buffets its boxy form.

The land to our west begins to rear up, gaining elevation as it forms a rugged, lop-sided spine for this tough little survivor of an island. At Baltasound, the only settlement of any note, landmarks are few and far between. There's an airstrip without regular flights, a bus shelter (Bobby's, with a chair, a dressing-up box and a lot of books about bees) and a spaceport, Saxa Vord, without regular spaceships.

At Haroldswick, the A-road dissolves into a web of single-track lanes, and we make for Skaw beach. That road ends at a tiny farm, a gate and the most beautiful arc of empty white beach. It is not warm but nor is it cold, and the low afternoon sun and the thin, ever-shifting cloud collaborate their way through a dozen moods every minute. Surface run-off the colour of strong tea cuts its own little drainage channels in the sand. The surf – apparently gentle, welcoming even, close to shore – becomes sinister in its very obvious power a little further out, where the ocean runs free.

Up on the hill, the Spaceport's a reminder of just how far north we are. This corner of the UK might seem like the weirdest place in which to assemble infrastructure as ambitious as that required to launch satellites into polar orbit (and the truck drivers we meet who've hauled hotel modules here from Tilbury would likely agree), but Unst – as far north as St Petersburg, and with open ocean on three sides – could have been designed for the job. Its location offers unrestricted trajectories and its latitude, at 60° north, means rockets heading for the heavens are less burdened by unwanted eastward velocity, making launches more fuel-efficient. (The closer to the equator your launch site, the more fuel you must burn correcting for the Earth's higher rotational speed.) Carefree, munching grass and living what must be about as idyllic an existence as it's possible for an earthbound creature to achieve, a rabbit fixes me with a look that says: 'Why would you want to leave this place for the cold vacuum of space?' Taking a drink of purest mountain water, collected from the UK's highest frontier just a couple of days ago, I couldn't agree more.

Sand in our shoes, cheeks bright from the breeze, it's a short drive round to the radar station, the climb – to nearly 1000ft – single-track and steep. Front-wheel drive it may be, but the Frontera breezes it. Built during the Second World War, expanded despite the challenges (Shetland's ferocious winds have claimed more than one radar array over the years), decommissioned in more peaceful times and brought back online in 2017, the station's gatehouse buildings are a post-apocalyptic collection of shattered windows, ravaged concrete and rusted chain-link fence. Fortunately, we can skirt around, get a little further north and hopefully leave with a less austere final image.

Muckle Flugga should be an unknown place; a forgotten, two-word footnote on the unknowable enormity of the face of the Earth. But there's a ring to the name (*CAR* writer and drive story pioneer Phil Llewellin referenced it in his book title, of course) and the island is a ticks-all-the-boxes icon of remoteness. At once stoic yet fragile-looking, it's an affecting expression both of our urge to conquer frontiers and of the elemental solitude of this place.

The clouds have cleared. Autumn sunshine has turned the rolling seas into a patchwork of brilliant aquamarine and deepest indigo. Behind us, Burrafirth Beach basks in late-afternoon amber. Like the deep, bassy rumble of an ever-breaking storm, you feel the ocean as much as hear it, the only other sounds the whisper of the wind and the screech of gulls. Remote and isolated by UK standards, it should feel lonely here. It's just us, the Frontera and the sea. But it doesn't. There's tranquillity where you might expect unease. And that makes sense, right? Because for all its otherworldliness, this is still home – for us and for the car we came in. **car**

With thanks to Promote Shetland (shetland.org), NorthLink Ferries (northlinkferries.co.uk), Lerwick Port Authority and Belmont House

The road ends here – literally

VAUXHALL FRONTERA ELECTRIC

PRICE £25,695 (£26,345 as tested)

POWERTRAIN 44kWh battery, single e-motor, front-wheel drive

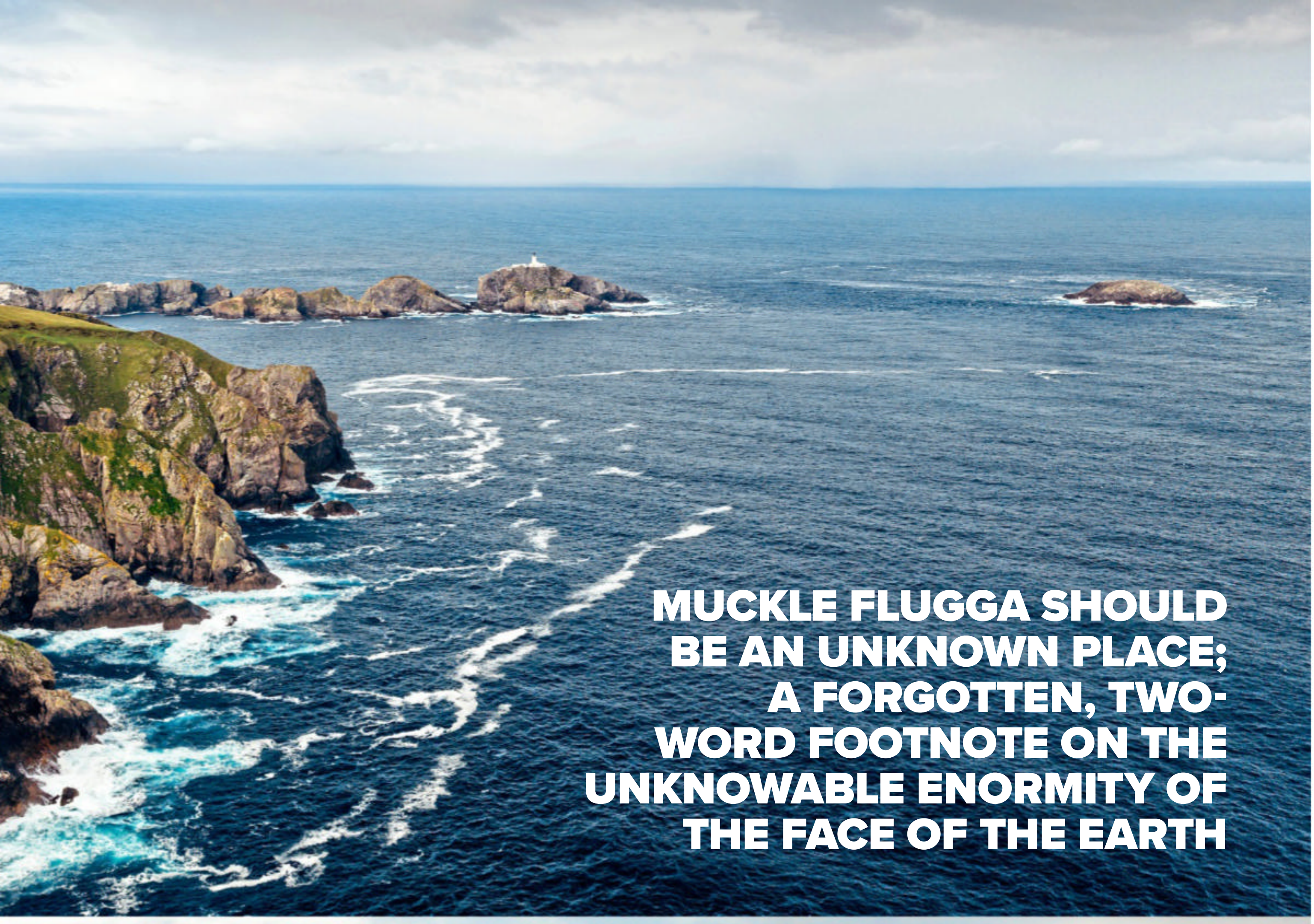
PERFORMANCE 111bhp, 125lb ft, 12.8sec 0-62mph, 88mph

WEIGHT 1514kg

EFFICIENCY 3.4 miles per kWh (official), 3.1-3.4 miles per kWh (tested), 186-mile range (official), 150-mile range (tested), 0g/km CO2

ON SALE Now

★★★★☆



MUCKLE FLUGGA SHOULD BE AN UNKNOWN PLACE; A FORGOTTEN, TWO-WORD FOOTNOTE ON THE UNKNOWABLE ENORMITY OF THE FACE OF THE EARTH

FRONTERA
L20 VXL

75 AHC
BMW (UK) Ltd

PRESENTS FROM THE PAST

Contrasting traditions go head to head in the form of two brilliant sports coupes: BMW's latest M2 CS and Porsche's nicely matured Cayman GTS

Words Ben Barry **Photography** Dean Smith

The new BMW M2 CS is ticking and cooling in a gravel car park on the North York Moors after an invigorating morning drive. Its M3-matching 523bhp kept me on my toes during a heavy downpour earlier, but as the traffic thinned and some sunshine warmed the asphalt it just flowed cross-country with such pace, composure and agility that the sat-nav's still processing what happened.

Given its pricing, the BMW definitely needs to be good. At £92,475 it's almost £24k beyond the base M2 and £3k more than even the M3 Competition xDrive. Add this test car's £8800 carbon-ceramic brakes and it breezes past six figures. Production numbers are officially limited, which may improve the chances of it making financial sense, though exactly how limited we do not know; nor do we know if this CS will eventually be topped by a CSL.

The new BMW is here to meet the soon-to-retire Porsche 718 Cayman 4.0 GTS, a car now five years old and not that far removed from the 981-generation Cayman we first drove in 2012. No matter, the 4.0 GTS remains a dynamic benchmark.

Why these two cars? Sharper and more exciting than regular BMW M or Porsche models, yet not so extreme (or expensive) as CSL or GT specials, BMW's CS and Porsche's GTS variants have become the default 'sweet spots' of their line-ups.

James Dennison's arrival in the Cayman announces itself with a howling flat-six exhaust note and spitty PDK gearshifts as he climbs from knots of damp, tighter turns below to the open expanses, clear sight lines and startlingly good conditions we're now basking in. Seeing the BMW and Porsche parked side by side in piercing autumn sunshine is a stark reminder that these German rivals continue to do the entry-level rear-drive sports coupe really quite differently.

The Cayman's voluptuous styling wraps round a two-seat cabin and a 4.0-litre naturally aspirated flat-six mounted low and amidships. It's 265kg lighter than the 1700kg BMW, as well as being compact and lower slung, with lines that succinctly communicate the fingertippy delicacy of this exceptional driving experience.

Positively old-school peak power of 395bhp and weight of just 1435kg contrasts with the Porsche's thoroughly modern price of £75,300, albeit that's £28k shy of the cheapest 911 and £17k short of the M2 CS. GTS trim adds 20mm lower sports suspension with adaptive dampers, Porsche Torque Vectoring with a mechanical locking diff, and the Sport Chrono pack, complete with mode switch on the steering wheel, dynamic transmission mounts and the little stopwatch on the dash.

To that, this car adds a further £13k in optional equipment. Nothing materially affects the driving experience, with most outlay going on £1824 Carmine Red paint, £2042 18-way sports seats and another – somewhat astonishing – £5k or so on cosmetic, comfort and audio upgrades for an interior that's nicely assembled and laid out, if lacking much in the way of surprise and delight.

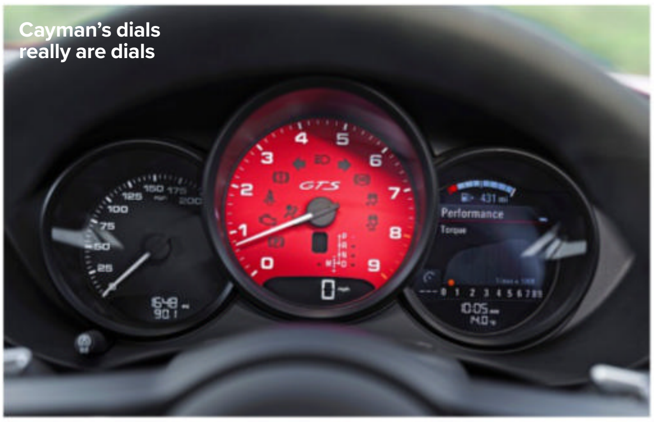
A word of warning on those optional 18-way chairs. My 6ft 1in frame normally slots into a Cayman so snugly it's as if I've been wheeled down the Zuffenhausen production line and the car built around me. Perversely, given all their infinite adjustment, these pricey perches don't motor quite far enough back and feel a little higher than in other Caymans. The M2 driver can drop down in a more satisfying manner.

Techies will also find the Porsche's (perfectly serviceable) infotainment system lacking in pizzazz, but you can't argue with the Cayman's focus – an otherwise perfect driving position, compact proportions that the 911 grew out of two generations ago, and a nice small-diameter steering wheel with a thin rim that makes the BMW's helm feel over-inflated.

You also get physical buttons in the Porsche. They're the hot new thing for some cars but they feature here simply because – like a stopped clock – the Cayman has hung in there and the 2010s have come back into fashion.

By comparison, stepping inside the BMW feels like someone's mobilised my living room. There are big screens and space for the family, if no central holder for a drinks bottle because the CS ▶

HOLD A GEAR TO OVERTAKE AND THE M2 SURGES FORWARDS EFFORTLESSLY


Cayman's dials really are dials

Porsche seats a pricey option of dubious merit

Rear-drive M cars are a rarity these days

CS feels very different to the regular M2

Power deficit? With steering this good, it vanishes

Bag-friendly boot a bonus, not a selling point

carbonfibre centre console deletes it, which is both bizarre and frustrating. Nonetheless, a roomy, high-tech cabin is a key weapon in the G87-generation M2's armoury – it's just so usable and feels so much more up-to-date than the rather classic Cayman.

JD worries the M2's become too big, noting it's the same width and barely a passenger lighter than an M4 CS. 'The BMW's usability is really excellent,' he concedes. 'The cabin is anything but stripped-out despite the extra performance focus and has everything you need for everyday driving – it's just that, for me, half the appeal of a sports car on UK roads is less width and weight.'

A bluff profile, Lego-like wheelarches and a bonnet creased like its 3.0-litre turbo six is trying to punch its way out all carry over from the standard M2. Visual CS differentiation instead comes via more open vents that leave the cooling apparatus looking vulnerable, and a full carbonfibre bootlid with a flourish that's more skate ramp than duck tail. Finished in Sapphire Black metallic with bespoke gold wheels, this CS is a screaming chicken and CB aerial away from a *Smokey and the Bandit* tribute, which I'm all here for.

The M2 CS comes with carbon-shelled bucket seat that are optional on the regular M2. Bolsters like blades require caution as you climb aboard, and the rollercoaster-style carbon bit between your legs continues to feel a bit odd, but they're pleasingly snug and surprisingly comfortable once you're ensconced, even for long schleps. They're electrically adjusted and heated too.

Thumb the starter, wake the engine with its deep growl (which sounds a little raspier than standard, certainly more crackly on the over-run) and it takes very little time to detect some pretty marked differences to the stock M2 – a car I liked from the off but which leaves room for a less isolated, faster and somewhat sharper sibling.

The ride is tetchy at low speeds, and more feeling tingles up from Michelin Pilot Sport 4S rubber to excite that chunky alcantara rim. Throttle response is also perhaps a little over-egged in my preferred Sport mode – all edgy on tip-in before settling down into the meat of its travel – and the eight-speed auto gets a slightly clumsy kick in its third and most aggressive mode. There is no manual transmission.

But after that patchy prelude, I start to bond with the M2 on some extremely familiar B-roads just a few miles from home. Above 30mph that initially lumpy ride becomes smoother, the eager throttle mapping becomes second nature, and when I knock back the shifts to their mid setting, the powertrain eases into buttery bliss. Hold a gear to overtake and the M2 surges forwards effortlessly, if still with a large helping of drama. You can't half make progress in this thing.

Configured in Sport mode for everything, except Comfort for the dampers, the CS settles into a fluid, controlled stride, its six-cylinder engine a slightly dark, omnipotent force churning away up ahead and the chassis melding elasticity and stability with some very welcome extra feel. Experimentation with Sport damping reveals the second of three adaptive settings is the best for relatively smooth roads and brings benefits in tightened body control, but more limber-limbed Comfort is almost always preferable.

For such a pronounced difference in feel over the stock M2, hardware changes are actually pretty minimal. They include 8mm lower springs, stiffer engine mounts, forged alloys (275/35 ZR19 front and 285/30 ZR20 rear tyres are unchanged from the base model), while the Driver's pack is thrown in too, which uncorks top speed to 188mph. Unlike any other modern CS BMW, this M2 is also purely rear-wheel drive.

For the rest of its transformation, the CS relies on calibration magic – for its throttle map, M3-matching power bump, adaptive dampers, e-diff, stability control and electric power steering. It's the sort of stuff that risks being imperceptible to anyone but chassis engineers, but it all manifests as one holistic and highly tangible shift in character.

Scudding over the Moors, the balance is definitely more oversteer biased than a regular M2. On colder tyres and stability control given its longer M Dynamic mode leash, the CS pivots into turns with surprisingly little inertia – the steering feels more eager off the straight-ahead to me, not communicative enough initially for JD. And it lets you wind on a decent amount of corrective lock before intervening under power.

At first the balance is agility bordering on instability, in a manner that recalls the last-generation M4 GTS – especially how swiftly the rear snaps to attention to follow the steering input, with the usual overshoot as the rear axle gathers itself up all but eliminated. ▶

THE CS SHRUGS OFF ENTRY SPEEDS THAT'D HAVE MOST PASSENGERS PULLING THE EJECT CORD

Eight-speed auto the only M2 CS transmission

Golden Bronze alloys are a new design

BMW is more powerful but also heavier

Suspension superb on the lightweight Porsche

IT'S A DAUNTING BAR FOR THE CAYMAN TO VAULT, BUT IT TAKES THE FIGHT TO THE BMW

Work heat into the tyres, though, and grip levels step up to match the flighty response. The CS shrugs off entry speeds that'd have most passengers pulling the eject cord and refuses to let go at the rear even when the tyres are on tippy toes and the fronts are fully loaded. Instead you get to dictate the cornering line with the throttle, something that could otherwise be a huge leap of faith but is de-risked here by excellent 10-stage traction control.

When fully unshackled the M2 CS slides more progressively than the base car. Perhaps the extra oomph helps overwhelm grip more decisively, but gut feel says diff tuning plays a significant role – I'd guess more open off-throttle as you turn, more aggressively locked as you feed in power, but whatever the special sauce, there's definitely a big shift in the M2's cornering balance.

Performance is another area where you frown at the spec sheet and wonder just how much of the 49bhp uplift and 30kg weight saving you can feel, but the fact that the 0-124mph benchmark is done in 11.7sec (1.2sec faster) gives some indication of the grunt being served here.

First and second gears blow by in a blur and are arguably too exaggerated, but by the time I settle into the more relaxed third and fourth cogs the CS is just stretching out on one indulgent surge of power through to 6500rpm (although the powerband actually feels wider than that suggests).

There is a little lag until 2000rpm or so, and peak torque of 479lb ft from not much after is excessive in the wet for a purely rear-drive car (just keep the traction systems on) but in the dry it's sublime, allowing you to really dig into this chassis and exploit its adjustability. It's more agile and with more attitude than the also-excellent M4 CS, and clearly differentiated from its base sibling. I like it a lot.

It's a daunting bar for the Cayman to vault, but the ageing Porsche still takes the fight convincingly to the BMW – and thankfully looks set to return for a new generation, Porsche having rowed back on making the next-gen Boxster and Cayman purely electric. Toppy models will continue to be petrol powered, says boss Oliver Blume, which we hope will include the GTS.

It's like the genesis of the 4.0 GTS all over again, when Porsche introduced the four-pot Cayman and Boxster, then rustled up the naturally aspirated GTS flat-six when purists lost their minds. Born from pragmatism (and the GT4 parts bin), it helped transform the GTS from what was effectively a tempting options bundle into a much more clearly defined car – no longer a rich man's S, it became the next best thing to a GT4 while also being easier to live with.

Almost six years on, the GTS remains an incredibly special experience, defined by the purity and cohesion of its drive, all centred around a remarkable engine. All mechanical grit at idle, warm bass in the meat of its powerband and howling treble at higher rpm, it's so tuneful I want to blow down its intake plenum and play its manifolds like a six-into-one wind instrument.

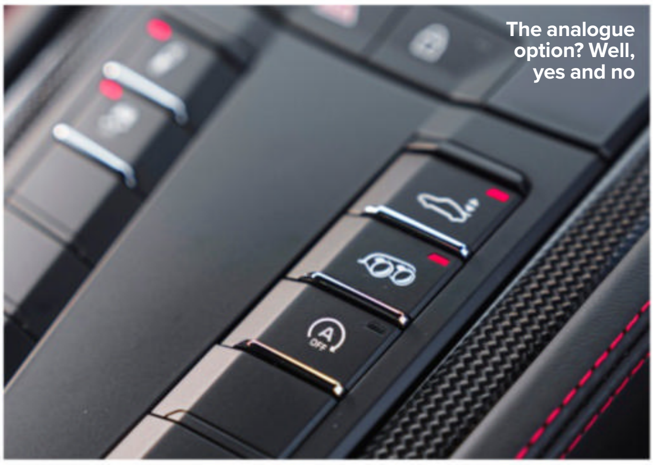
Response is always on the button, but crank up the little dial on the steering wheel and both throttle and gearshifts become even more vital. It's a synaptic, highly mechanical connection, even with the brilliant PDK transmission.

'It's a shame they don't offer it with a manual gearbox,' says Dennison, 'but the Cayman leads for throttle response, gearbox ▶

Lots of low-key yet costly options in Cayman's cabin

GTS the sweet spot for many Porsche models

718 Cayman GTS



The analogue option? Well, yes and no

Fab CS engine isn't musical like the GTS

VEHICLE STATUS
Tyre Pressure Monitor
Tyre Pressure Monitor active.
Engine oil level
Engine oil level OK.
Check Control
No entries.
Service
Adaptive content
Journey data
Vehicle status
21.0°
20.5°

Carbon-shelled buckets optional on M2, standard here

What passes for uncluttered in 2025

YOU CAN USE MORE OF THE INTUITIVE-FEELING PORSCHE'S POTENTIAL ON THE ROAD

and soundtrack – the CS engine is strong and exciting, but the noise won't win any awards and it can't match the Porsche's response.'

If you're stepping out of the BMW and into the Porsche, you initially experience the weird illusion that it's down a couple of cylinders. Long gearing, particularly in first and second, combines with significantly lower peak torque of 317lb ft at 5000rpm to really knock the wind from its sails.

But this motor thrives on revs, rewarding the commitment you put in to summit at 7000rpm. By the time you reach third gear the speed has overcome inertia to such an extent that the ratio feels perfectly well suited. Impeccable dynamics then do the rest, ensuring momentum stays high simply because you can flow the Cayman so beautifully through bends. Get into a groove and you can go at the Moors in the GTS like a dog digging up a back yard for a bone.

It's saying something that the M2's turn-in response actually makes the Porsche helm seem a little sleepy, but the overall feel is more fluid and natural than its BMW rival. It's in the Porsche's supple damping, the perfect weight and consistency of its more linear and organic steering, and weight distribution that simply feels inherently better – feathery at the front, planted at the rear, and with an adjustability that quickly builds a dialogue between car and driver.

Through one long, clearly sighted sweeper over moorland, I just point the steering, pin the throttle and the Cayman glides over the buckled surface like a rolling pin over dough. Even really gnarly mid-corner bumps fail to ruffle its flow. When I swap back into the M2, I'm much more aware of its suspension fighting to control the considerable extra mass through the same corner, and that it becomes more ragged and less satisfying as a result.

Lower performance also means the Cayman can get away with a small footprint for its P Zero rubber, so while the 20-inch diameter is big, the 235- front and 265-section rears are pretty narrow by modern performance-car standards. This all means you can use much more of the Porsche's potential on the road, playing with its balance by tweaking steering and lifting the throttle mid-bend, where the M2's interactivity is accessed with a heavier right foot as you fire out of the corner (in addition to steering bungs and throttle lifts). This is why JD describes the Porsche as the more intuitive car to exploit, and one that he finds better suited to UK roads.

The Porsche's performance also translates better to wet conditions, and relies far less on its traction- and stability-control systems to keep the average driver out of trouble than the BMW. This is PG-rated handling fun to the M2's adult entertainment.

The Cayman GTS and M2 CS represent such different engineering philosophies – the BMW effectively a downsized, hotted-up mainstream saloon, the Porsche descended from a blue-blood sports car – yet they've converged on more or less the same ground with very impressive results, albeit with significant differences.

As the sun starts to dip and I try to decide which is the better car, I keep back-to-backing the Porsche and BMW down the same stretch of road and failing to return with a firm answer – marvelling at the Cayman's sublime balance one minute, then falling for the M2 CS's extra performance and drama the next.

So this will be a verdict that's ridiculously difficult to call… ▶

Mid-engined Porsche, front-engined BMW, both rear-driven

Verdicts don't get any closer, because both are great

FINAL RECKONING

NOW THE REALLY TRICKY BIT

Different traditions. Contrasting layouts. Divergent power and weight figures, and several years separating them in terms of electronics. Yet on the road they feel very much like competitors.

The Cayman delivers the purer, more unfiltered driving experience. Its mid-engine dynamics are sublimely finessed, and its naturally aspirated flat-six remains a benchmark for character and response.

Never mind the Cayman costs £17k less than the BMW, it delivers a taste of exoticism for less than half the cost of a supercar – the added bonus being the Cayman is more compact and lighter than those big hitters, and offers performance and dynamics that are so harmoniously exploitable that its stability systems need rarely intervene.

Even if you barely use its potential, the Cayman feels special, from the sweetness of its steering to the zing of its powertrain. All this prompted much debate between James Dennison and myself, and was the cause of so much hand-wringing on my part.

But one last drive in BMW swung it for me, simply because I found the greater drama it provided more immersive and rewarding. Its mechanical changes might seem modest, but together they focus this package considerably – sharper, more reactive, more exciting, more feelsome too.

Not just a remarkable achievement for a front-engined car weighing 1.7 tonnes, the handling balance is fantastic full stop – it feels connected, secure and supple at speed, yet on its toes and ready to turn at a moment's notice.

It also has 523bhp from a responsive straight-six with the muscle to really dig into this sweetly balanced chassis. It delivers intensity beyond even the Cayman, and leaves its rival feeling a little one-dimensional – the Porsche's chassis can clearly handle way more power, where the BMW gives you so much that its driver becomes a more critical factor in extracting it.

Less decisive in this performance-focused test, if still important, the M2 CS's cabin and boot are more usable, its interior more modern and its infotainment far superior. It is the best M car BMW currently makes, and the winner of our test by a whisker. car

1st

BMW M2 CS

Incredible performance with exploitable handling and usability

★★★★★

2nd

PORSCHE 718 CAYMAN 4.0 GTS

Sublime chassis, exceptional powertrain and good value

★★★★★

WATCH THE VIDEO!
GET *CAR*'S DIGITAL EDITION. SEE PAGE 54

BMW M2 CS

What's the line-up?

The base M2 costs from £68,795, and offers 473bhp with either manual or auto gearboxes and standard rear-wheel drive. Stepping up to the 523bhp M2 CS takes pricing to £92,475 – a gulf that leaves plenty of monetary real estate to add Official M Performance parts to the standard model, not to mention the Track Pack upgrade we've spied testing at the Nürburgring.

Data

Price £92,475 (£101,275 as tested) **Powertrain** 2993cc 24v turbocharged six-cylinder, eight-speed automatic, rear-wheel drive **Performance** 523bhp @ 6250rpm, 479lb ft @ 2750rpm, 3.8sec 0-62mph, 188mph **Weight** 1700kg **Efficiency** 28.3mpg (official), 16.0mpg (tested), 323-mile range (official), 183-mile range (tested), 226g/km CO2 **Length/width/height** 4587/1887/1395mm **Boot capacity** 390 litres

PORSCHE 718 CAYMAN 4.0 GTS

What's the line-up?

The good news? There are 718 Cayman derivatives galore, from 2.0- and 2.5-litre flat-fours (base, S and T variants) to the 4.0-litre naturally aspirated sixes found in GTS, GT4 and GT4 RS models. The bad? Porsche is no longer accepting new orders on the Cayman in the UK, instead pointing you to existing stock. Good luck with the haggling. Electric and combustion replacements will come, we're told.

Data

Price £75,300 (£88,514 as tested) **Powertrain** 3995cc 24v flat-six, seven-speed dual-clutch auto, rear-wheel drive **Performance** 395bhp @ 7000rpm, 317lb ft @ 5000rpm, 4.0sec 0-62mph, 179mph **Weight** 1435kg **Efficiency** 28.0mpg (official), 18.6mpg (tested), 394-mile range (official), 262-mile range (tested), 230g/km CO2 **Length/width/height** 4405/1994/1276mm **Boot capacity** 150 litres (plus 182 litres behind the seats)

6

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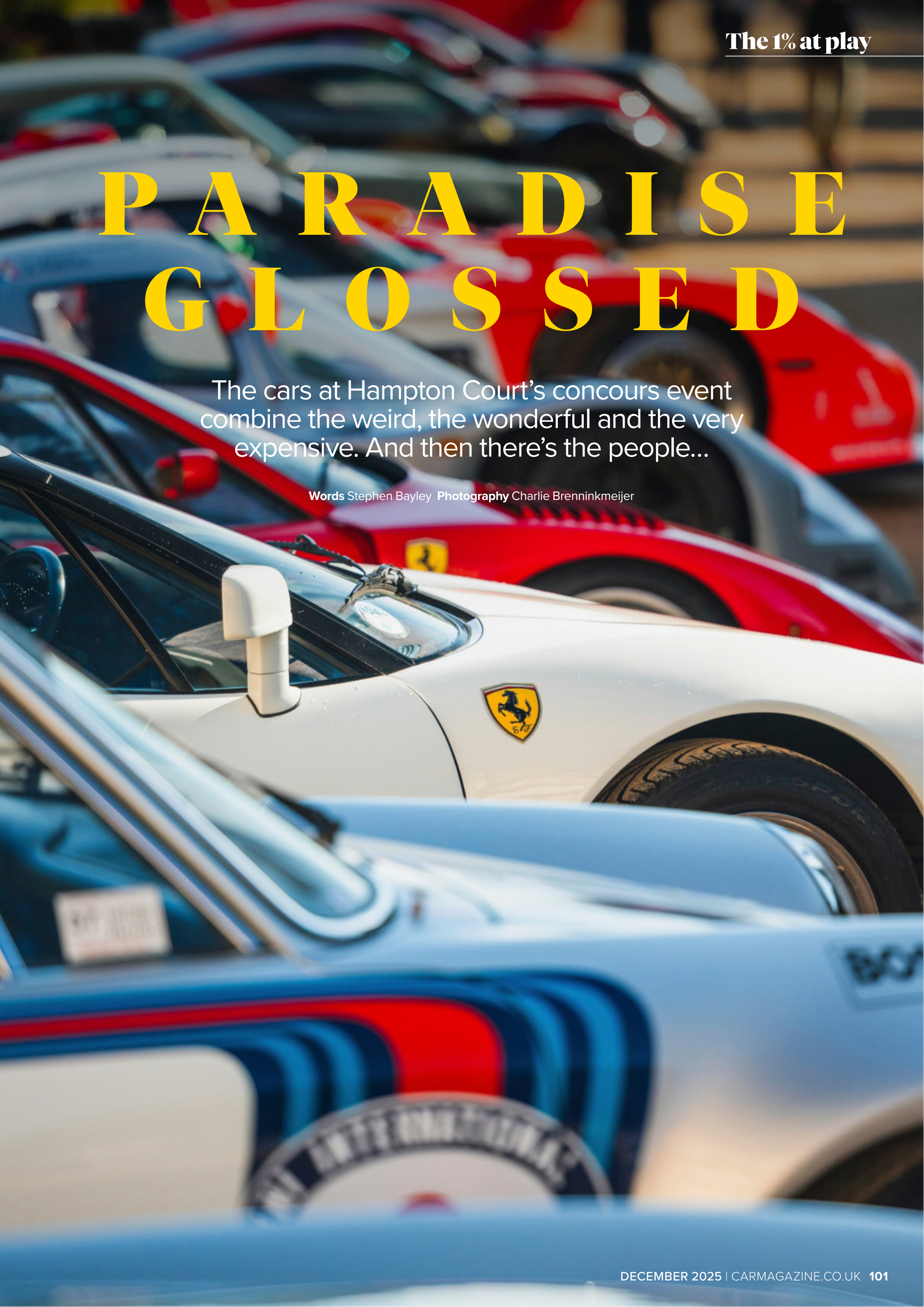
CONCOURS OF ELEGANCE
HAMPTON COURT PALACE
5-7 SEPTEMBER 2025
THE LEVITT CONCOURS

DELAHAYE
COMPETITION



PARADISE GLOSSED

The cars at Hampton Court's concours event combine the weird, the wonderful and the very expensive. And then there's the people…

Words Stephen Bayley **Photography** Charlie Brenninkmeijer

Even the crunch of gravel is exclusive

1926 Rolls declared best in show

The Cyberster of its day

CONCOURS OF ELEGANCE

Panama and shades: belt and braces for heads

This 1912 Silver Ghost started life in India with the Maharajah of Nabha

It's always sunny for the Concours of Elegance crowd

JG Ballard, a lugubrious novelist specialising in disturbing dystopias, predicted that by about now, the private car would be made illegal on public roads. Its use would be restricted to private 'motoring parks' where it might be enjoyed only under psychiatric supervision.

We are not far off this moment, or so I ruminated on the way to the Concours of Elegance at Hampton Court Palace. And as if to illustrate the futility of the car as credible transport in 2025, my journey was on the train. Fast, clean, efficient. At one point where the railway line runs close to the road, we overtook a Lamborghini, struggling at 20mph.

A friend with a classic Jaguar XK140 offered me a lift back, but warned that we might never make it, traffic being what it is and his Jaguar being temperamental. Essentially, no one in their right mind would drive from Central London, where I live, to East Molesey, where you find Hampton Court.

But this is no more about driving than Leonardo's *Last Supper* is about recipes. The glory of a Concours of Elegance is that the institutionalised defiance of practicality and 'progressive' nostrums concerning the climate and the redistribution of wealth is absolute and total. Therefore, thrilling. A concours is not about road transport. It is about culture: here are cars that have leapt the species barrier. Their primary purpose is not to be driven, although many are, but to excite nostalgia, yearning, desire, curiosity, envy and reflection. Thus, essentially the same excitations as 'art'.

And Hampton Court is a fine and appropriate setting for such an emotive spectacle. A project of Cardinal Wolsey, Hampton Court became Henry VIII's playground. Here you had floats, tableaux vivants, luxurious guest accommodation for visiting ambassadors and such, splendour and noise. There was jousting, wrestling, tennis, whoring, feasting, murder and tilting.

When he died in 1547, our Henry weighed 400lb and had a 54-inch waist. He cycled all his patient and tragic six wives through East Molesey. And my suspicion was that many of the exhibitors at the Hampton Court Concours might have been paying tribute to his example. There is forever a whiff of transgressive Eros in any concours atmosphere. Apex-predator males display their prestige and power as expressed in their choice of precious metal and trophy companions. Apart from, I imagine, the punishment wing of a Texas correctional facility, there cannot be anywhere less woke on Earth.

I know the concours schtick quite well. Over the past 30 years I have been a judge at the Louis Vuitton Concours at Hurlingham, the Cartier Style et Luxe at Goodwood, Schloss Bensberg near Cologne, La Massa on the banks of the Arno and Palazzo Varignana in ▶

This is no more about driving than Leonardo's *Last Supper* is about recipes

99 years on, still dropping jaws

'That photographer will never find me here. Oh'

Apart from, I imagine, the punishment wing of a Texas correctional facility, there cannot be anywhere less woke on Earth

Motor Valley, near Bologna. It is an international democracy of the – frankly – rich who are not detained by conscience. Like particles in Brownian motion, they disperse across Europe and then coalesce. This time in Surrey.

And what I have learnt is the humans on display in any good concours are at least as interesting as the automobiles which belong to them. I don't give a rat's patootie about who's running a lighter crankshaft, a topic I have often overheard being discussed. But I do know that the journey of a thousand miles begins with a glass of champagne.

This article originated with notes made in a tent belonging to Charles Heidsieck, the grande marque founded by the man who gave the world the expression 'Champagne Charlie', for which we must be grateful. It was not yet midday, but there were many Champagne Charlies who had evidently started earlier than me and would, I guess, finish long, long afterwards. That's concours style: not for the morally fastidious. It's all about appetite. And, of course, style.

For the observer of human foibles, these events are as gold. I was not the first to notice this. 'New Journalist' Tom Wolfe's breakthrough was an assignment to cover the New York Hot Rod & Custom Car Show, not quite a concours, but near enough. He was expecting to find 'lower-class creeps and nutballs with dermatitic skin and ratty hair'. Instead, he was transfixed by the wonder of it all. The glamour.

Then Wolfe visited the Teen Fair at Burbank in California, where girls in bouffants and very tight stretch pants were observed and admired. He found boys in Levi's, Slim Jims, T-shirts and polos. He heard an announcer say: 'I hate to break up the dancing, but let's have a little drag racing.' I would have liked to have seen drag racing at Hampton Court. I feel Henry VIII would have approved.

And this led to Wolfe's epic formulation: cars are 'freedom, style, sex, power, motion, colour – everything.' You can strike freedom from that list. Possibly motion too. But the rest stand.

And dress codes remain fundamental in the pageant. I went styled as a Milanese architect (a recurrent personal fantasy), so stood out from the armies of entrants and officials in uniforms of blue blazers, striped ties, ivory-coloured chinos and Panama hats. The women tended towards wafty floral prints, Ascot-equivalent hats worn very competitively, and I saw more than one lace parasol. Lanyards were mandatory.

There's a lot in common between art connoisseurship and the concours classics. Oil paintings have surface craquelure while cars have patina. Or, at least, the really good ones do. Canvases reveal brush strokes, coachwork has hammer marks. Art has provenance, automobiles have service history. Restored or over-restored? And, of course, now that proper art is beyond the reach of anyone not in possession of billions, fine cars are collectible too. The 'best in show' is an institution of Crufts and of any concours. Collectors are a competitive tribe, which may be why some psychologists have defined collecting as a sort of psychosis. One of the great collectors was Alistair McAlpine, Mrs Thatcher's consigliere, who assembled policemen's truncheons, which he could date very precisely according to the method of wood-turning. And collectors are compulsive: I know someone with two Ferrari 250 GTOs.

Anyway, the evidence of psychosis and the urge to display it was impressive. I admired a 1956 AC Ace and admired even more its aesthetic source: an early Ferrari Barchetta, along with the pre-War BMW 328, the fundamental inspiration for sports cars in the sports car's Golden Age. A 1935 MG PA Airline, one of only 50 made by taxi builder Carbodies, was a superb example of naive artisans coming to beautiful terms with the black art of aerodynamics. The 1970 four-rotor Wankel-engined Mercedes C111 from 1970 may not be quite so elegant as Giugiaro's nearly contemporary Iso Grifo, but it is a startling design which would astonish if it were launched tomorrow.

And worst in show? Well, when you have seen a 1955 Mercedes-Benz W196, a Formula 1 Tyrrell of the '70s seems as rough as a badger's arse. But the Porsche GT3R Rennsport had me searching for antonyms of 'elegance'. The ones I found included crass, boorish, brutal, rude. This car, all charcoal carbon, over-engineered but under-considered, was a dire travesty of Dr Porsche's founding philosophy of lightness and simplicity. What sort of neuro-divergent disorder would be required to make or want such a thing? Its use ▶

Goodwood has a hill and a track. Hampton Court has symmetry

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SCHECKTER
N MANSELL
Marlboro

Mansell's 1989 Ferrari part of an F1 at 75 celebration

Hispano Suiza
HS-3566

Just imagine the dedication needed to keep these cars in running order

Don a driving glove without sniggering and you're in

What the best dressed Milanese architects are wearing this year

Back up the chimney, boy

In a godless age fine cars connect us with an idea of beauty. In a virtual age, fine cars remind us how much more engrossing the tactile and embodied analogue experience is

case is so specific as to obliterate any sort of elegance. I looked at it on the day Porsche was de-listed from the main Frankfurt stock exchange and felt only a sense of melancholy.

And the weirdest? A 'remastered' Rolls-Royce Corniche retro-fitted with an electric powertrain which won my Kim Jong Un Design Prize. Its interior features a sculpture inspired by Scottish rivers. This made me think how rarely people acknowledge Balenciaga's fine observation that 'elegance is elimination'.

What, in the end, are all these people doing here ? In a neat phrase honoured by time and polished to a fine lustre by repetition (especially by me), Roland Barthes said: 'Cars are our cathedrals.' To confirm his association with motor vehicles, the philosopher was mortally run over by a laundry truck on a Left Bank boulevard.

His comparison is apt. Like cathedrals, concours cars are (mostly) static. And like a cathedral, a concours is the setting for a collective act of worship. In a godless age fine cars connect us with an idea of beauty. In a virtual age, fine cars remind us how much more engrossing the tactile and embodied analogue experience is.

And as any medieval theologian would have told you, beauty was evidence of the divine. And God is in the details. The baseball mitt stitching – red contrasting with tan – in the cabin of a 1951 Ferrari Barchetta was mesmerising. As was its glorious body-colour red instrument binnacle. Glorious was the dramatic triangular collector of the exhaust on a rare 1926 Rally Grand Sport with a scalloped trailing edge, rather like a Boeing 787's engine nacelles.

And the colours were a study in their own right. That AC was in a gorgeously subtle Light Dynasty Blue. There was a bechamel Bentley, a Gordon's Gin green Aston Martin, a pistachio Delahaye, and Bruno Sacco's fabulous rotary Mercedes-Benz was a negotiation between mango and tangerine. Impossible not to admire a custard-and-ink coloured 1940 Bugatti Type 57 Atalante. Food imagery confirms we are actually discussing taste.

With not a care or concern about blasphemy, they used to ask: what car would Jesus drive? I think the answer is probably a dreadful BMW 2-series Active Tourer supplied by Motability. On the train home, I wondered what car Henry VIII would have driven. And surely the answer would be a 1961 Ghia L6.4 coupe, once favoured by Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra. Here is an Italo-American confection so gloriously vulgar it makes a contemporary Facel-Vega look as chaste as a nun's knicker drawer.

If I am tempted into over-wrought metaphors it is because I find this whole concours culture rather affecting. I'll explain. The very first photograph taken of me shows a baby sitting on the enormous headlamp of his father's architecturally impressive Georges Roesch Talbot, forming an early emotional connection with the motor car which has not yet been broken.

And flicking through the fat Hampton Court Concours catalogue in reminiscence for this writing what do I find ? A 1933 Talbot-London AV105 with Van Den Plas bodywork and… those huge headlamps. It was like coming full circle. It was like the Chinese Buddhist Great Wheel of Law, Truth and Life. We always return.

Perhaps the very first lyrical account of travelling by car was an article published in *Le Figaro* in 1907. The author was Marcel Proust, no less. In his masterpiece, *Remembrance of Things Past*, Proust says the real paradises are the ones we have lost. I started with dystopia and have ended with paradise. That's the journey a good Concours of Elegance takes you on. As I say, full circle. All the people in Hampton Court are searching for paradise lost. **car**

Our cars

HELLO ALFA JUNIOR + GOODBYE SKODA SUPERB & HONDA CIVIC TYPE R + VW GOLF GTI MEETS ITS HERO

KN25 HSZ
SKODA

Rallying, hot EVs? Yup, all good. But the Superb is central

Malcolm Griffiths

SKODA SUPERB MONTH 7

Eyes on the prize

Skoda does a lot of things well. But what it currently does better than anyone is big, friendly estates. By **Jake Groves**

The story so far

Innovative? Nope. But the Superb remains trusty, well-built and wonderfully comfy

+ Better than claimed economy at times; comfort; space

- Slow auto 'box; sometimes uncooperative infotainment

Logbook

Price £44,820 (£46,110 as tested) **Performance** 1968cc turbodiesel four-cylinder, 190bhp, 295lb ft, 7.5sec 0-62mph, 148mph **Efficiency** 46.7mpg (official), 49.8mpg (tested) **Energy cost** 12.9p per mile **Miles this month** 679 **Total miles** 7792

Did you know Skoda has been involved in motorsport for more than 120 years? There have been hillclimbs and there was a foray into Le Mans, but its main discipline has been rallying. Mostly recently it's been the Fabia that's continued the decades-long tradition of securing success on gravel tracks, muddy tree-flanked trails and epic snow drifts.

Also… did you know the Skoda Elroq vRS is the quickest-accelerating Skoda ever? It's a car that takes the essence of the sporty vRS sub-brand and mixes it with electric power rather well. Is it all that much fun? Mmm… jury's out on that one. But it's still an impressively rounded performance car.

While I don't want to suggest that these massive parts of Skoda's business are peripheral, my point is that – despite being rather good at motorsports and making EVs – its USP hasn't been lost in the process. What Skoda is best known for is making well-made, roomy and smartly thought-out family cars. And, after several months at the wheel of this Superb Estate, I can safely say that Skoda is definitely not neglecting its foundations.

Every journey in the Superb is like stepping into a zen garden after a long or arduous day. Tired? Or just want to go home without any fuss? No bother. The Superb will let you sink into those thickly-padded chairs, turn on the massage function and relax as the miles go by. All with the real possibility of very easily securing better-than-claimed economy from that trusty diesel engine.

Have I needed the 4x4 element of this 2.0-litre Superb? Absolutely not, but the extra power compared to the front-wheel-drive TDI model is welcome. This feels surprisingly sprightly when you get it on the boil, playing with those gearbox paddles. Which you'll want to as, left to its own devices, the auto is ponderous. It totally fits the laid-back vibe, yes, but limits your ability to take advantage of gaps in roundabout traffic.

Making calmer progress is where the Skoda is at its best. The ride is very well-judged, feeling plush without being wallowy. And, unusually, I wouldn't particularly say this car would benefit from the fitment of adaptive dampers – the Superb rides plenty well ▶

Ours is a 4x4, but that's not needed for how we've used it

enough without them in this SE L spec.

What's been most useful is the space. You could happily play tennis in the second row, where legroom is better than in a limo with a three-pointed star on the front, and there are just enough in-built features to occupy even the most easily distracted kids.

Our long-term test car has been involved in not one but two house moves. With the rear seats folded down, the boot proved to be so large that it meant there was no need for the van I'd borrowed for the job. In daily use I'd have loved an in-built luggage separator, as seen in the Volvo V60 featured alongside the Superb in these pages last month, but the hooks and cubbies down the sides come in handy.

Did all the cabin tech work? Mostly. Skoda managed not to get sucked into VW's touch-sensitive switchgear black hole with its clever Smart Dials, as part of an infotainment set-up that shows every sign of having had some thought put into it by someone who actually drives cars. The instruments are customisable, clear and benefit from a quick-access menu that makes it easy to get to the safety features you will most often want to adjust, without the need to take your eyes off the road for a long time.

I did, however, have the odd hiccup with wireless Android Auto, including one incident where the whole system just gave up before swiftly resetting.

I can't say living with the Superb has been a thrill a minute. It's not designed to be. Instead, it's a car created to eat miles for breakfast, lunch and dinner, and to do so fully loaded with people and stuff, never making even a hint of fuss.

It's a car that happily blends into the background and gets on with the job. I'm hoping that will continue to be Skoda's approach. The recent radical Vision O concept suggests significant changes might be afoot, which is a worry if it means the sacrifice of everything the Superb badge has come to stand for.

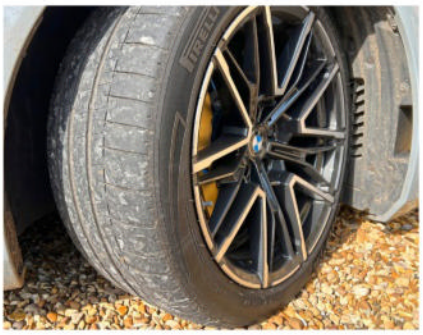
But then again, Skoda has demonstrated a long-term commitment to making useful, comfortable and well-built cars, with enough smart thinking to edge them ahead of the pack. Fuss-free and and yet also endearing. If that attitude remains at the heart of Skoda then we shouldn't be worried about what the future holds.

I can't say living with the Superb Estate has been a thrill a minute. It just gets on with the job

Count the cost

Cost new £46,110 **Used value** £31,245 **Cost per mile** 15.3p **Cost per mile including depreciation** £2.05

Massage seats have almost always been on



BMW M5 TOURING MONTH 3

Just trust the technology

It turns out you shouldn't ignore tyre pressure warning systems. When the M5's pinged at the start of a journey, with me already running late, I didn't want to believe it. I once had a McLaren GT that permanently pinged at me not because it was flat but because when it was cold the temperature caused the pressures to drop.

By scrolling through the menus in the M5's dash, you can bring up the pressure readings for each tyre, and that revealed the left front has dropped by 0.1 bar. Sod it. I opted for a quick top-up on an airline and hoped that was enough.

But with the M5's display continuing to bong, discretion got the better part of valour and so when I reached my destination I got a colleague to check the tread while I drove slowly forward. And there it was, a massive nail embedded in the outer of the three grooves.

Fortunately there was a mobile tyre fitter based in a nearby town who very kindly came out at short notice. Doubly fortunately, the nail was in a section of tyre that could be repaired – so instead of £300 for a new tyre, it was £65 for the repair.

PIERS WARD

The story so far

A car that brings joy to any journey
+ Incredible blend of practicality and pace
- UK parking spaces aren't made for it; diff shunt when pulling out of junctions

Logbook

Price £113,605 (£133,858 as tested) **Performance** 18.6kWh battery, 4395cc twin-turbo V8 plus e-motor, 717bhp, 738lb ft **Efficiency** 148-176mpg (official), 28.8mpg (tested), 37-39g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 26.0p per mile **Miles this month** 1395 **Total miles** 5667

VOLVO EX30 MONTH 2

Virtual life without buttons

The photo above is a stark reminder that there really are *no* buttons on the dashboard of the Volvo EX30. There aren't even any instruments in front of the driver – it is a very pared-back, minimalist cabin. But have Volvo's cabin designers gone too far?

Early first drives criticised the EX30 for doing away with most physical controls, and it's true that an awful lot of features are packed into the Google-powered touchscreen. Now we're into our second month of ownership I have mixed thoughts: the infotainment is often very easy to use, but I find it annoying that quite so many common features are masked by pixels.

Heating? Two taps on the screen. Foglights? Three touches. Flicking off the wheel-tugging lane-keep assist? A three-prodder. Opening the glovebox? A single touch. Stalk-operated wipers and electric window switches, plus a button to unlock the doors, are the only physical controls.

It feels at odds with Volvo's leadership in sensible, Swedish ergonomics. Salt is rubbed in the wound when the driver-observing cameras then tell you off for looking away from the road and not concentrating! Sigh…

TIM POLLARD

The story so far

The smallest, cheapest electric Volvo
+ Right-sized; zippy and easy to drive
- Too many features in the touchscreen

Logbook

Price £39,860 (£39,860 as tested) **Performance** 64kWh battery, e-motor, 268bhp, 253lb ft, 5.3sec 0-62mph, 112mph (limited) **Efficiency** 3.7 miles per kWh (official), 3.2 miles per kWh (tested), 0g/km CO2 **Range** 296 miles (official), 205 miles (tested) **Energy cost** 10.0p per mile **Miles this month** 1198 **Total miles** 1821

INEOS GRENADIER MONTH 4

Inside the mind of a 4x4 owner

I can't deny, there's some kind of psychology going on when I drive the Grenadier. Environmentalists rage against wasteful SUVs and their shallow owners, looking for a status symbol. They think it's what's known as 'costly signalling' – like a peacock's tail, when an animal uses up precious resources on something that's useless, to signal it has food/strength/money to spare.

But I disagree – I think it's to do with what they call the 'augmentation of self'. Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty argued that tools are incorporated into the 'body schema' when we use them – so a blind man's cane isn't just something he holds, it becomes an extension of his touch. In the same way, a car is absorbed in our heads to become an 'embodied extension'. So when I drive the Grenadier I don't just symbolically feel bigger – my perceptual world is reorganised so that I really am bigger and taller and more powerful.

But the other day I borrowed my dad's trailer and it looked ridiculous, with its little wheels. I asked myself, 'Would The Rock pull a trailer like this?' Environmentalists can read into that what they will.

MARK WALTON

The story so far

A 4x4 with appeal beyond logic
+ It makes you feel invincible
- It's all in your head

Logbook

Price £69,995 (£73,943 as tested) **Performance** 2993cc turbodiesel six-cylinder, eight-speed automatic, all-wheel drive, 246bhp, 406lb ft, 9.9sec 0-62mph, 99mph **Efficiency** 23.1-26.9mpg (official), 22.5mpg (tested), 276-319g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 27.2p per mile **Miles this month** 1118 **Total miles** 4783

The ace of Clubs

How does our Golf GTI Clubsport stack up against the most extreme GTI ever, the Mk7 Clubsport S? By **Ben Barry**

The story so far

Weekday usability and weekend fun, in classic hot Golf style – but how does it actually stand up to comparison with a real classic Golf?

+ Clubsport returns with more attitude than the regular GTI and less cost than the R

- A bit more power would be nice at times

Logbook

Price £43,215 (£47,830 as tested) **Performance** 1984cc turbocharged four-cylinder, 296bhp, 295lb ft, 5.6sec 0-62mph, 168mph **Efficiency** 37.4mpg (official), 30.5mpg (tested), 168g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 19.6p per mile **Miles this month** 2077 **Total miles** 5289

If you're fond of performance Volkswagens, you'll probably know Andrew Chapple. Andrew's moved in VW circles since the early 2000s, when he founded Volkswizard, a one-man operation that still prepares and sells mostly VW Group vehicles from a Warwickshire base, with a YouTube channel.

Andrew is my go-to for VW buying advice, so when he offered his Mk7 Golf Clubsport S for comparison with our long-term Mk8.5 Clubsport, I suggested we connect for an evening of Golf-based chat at Caffeine & Machine in Warwickshire.

The Clubsport S will be a decade old in 2026 and still looks fantastic when Andrew rolls up in his Deep Black Pearl Effect example, even in the elevated context of C&M machinery. Parked alongside our new Mk8.5 Clubsport, it looks restrained if purposeful, with enough visual punch to set it apart for those in the know – key telltales being 19-inch Pretoria alloys, subtle decals, and a new front bumper matched to a larger rear spoiler.

Mk7 Golfs also have the advantage of being the final generation available as a three-door, which simply looks better.

There's real depth to this car's engineering beyond mere details, helping to elevate the S above the more rounded Clubsport model it was based on. The EA888 2.0-litre turbo engine matches the 306bhp of the Golf R from the same era and actually tops our car by 10bhp. The only transmission was a six-speed manual which, a decade on, now seems oddly perverse for a track special.

Other Clubsport S highlights include an aluminium front subframe, adaptive dampers, uprated brakes, bespoke caster and camber, and unique suspension knuckles. From the factory they also wore Michelin Cup 2 tyres, though this car is on less aggressive Goodyears.

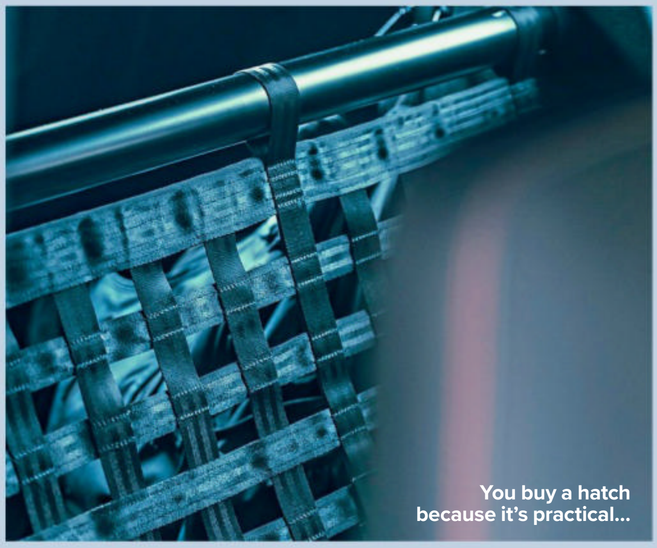
Weighing 1285kg, the Clubsport S is over 150kg lighter than our Mk8.5. There's some generational weight gain in that, but VW did remove most things behind the Clubsport S's driver, including rear seats, boot floor, parcel shelf and noise insulation.

It all helped the Clubsport S secure a front-wheel-drive ▶

Our Mk8.5 following the Mk7 Clubsport S

Lee Brimble

WG66 VVH
GTI



You buy a hatch because it's practical...

Nordschleife lap record time of 7min 49.21sec.

Andrew hands me his keys while he heads out for a refresher in our car; he has owned a Mk8 Clubsport and driven the Mk8.5.

His car's interior gets things off to a great start – you slot down into lovely fabric seats that combine relatively firm, figure-hugging bolsters with soft centres, and grip a gorgeously tactile steering-wheel rim. A usable if focused feel permeates this cabin, with only the infotainment truly dating it. A plaque above the gearlever reveals it to be number 242 of just 400 cars.

On the move, the Clubsport S has energy like a pot of water just about to boil and works brilliantly on B-roads – especially with Individual mode configured to max-attack engine calibration and the most supple suspension setting.

The engine has a lovely juicy midrange and excellent throttle response, and rips round the dial in a manner that demands you chase peak rpm. An exhaust 10mm larger helps bring out the EA888's fruitiness. Gearshifts are slick, aided by well weighted and placed pedals, again encouraging an attacking style.

Power is nicely matched to the chassis, like performance is trying to burst from the seams while just about being contained, so that you neither crave nor need any more. The damping, too, is fantastic, giving the Clubsport S a limber stride as it compresses, extends and carves its way over this rolling landscape. Combined with a positive front end, malleable rear, and fixed-ratio steering defined by its light, natural and highly textural detail, it's an engaging car to hustle – and yet still feels like it would be a pleasure to use day to day.

Only 150 of the run of 400 came to the UK

The Clubsport S has energy like a pot of water just about to boil and works brilliantly on B-roads

We head back to Caffeine & Machine to swap notes, and both our Clubsports draw glances. This is Andrew's second example, the first bought new in 2016 for £33,995 and sold for identical money nearly two years and 5000 miles later. He subsequently bought this car in 2023 for £33k with 12,000 miles on the clock. Today Ss are advertised from a low of £30k up to £40k for delivery-miles cars – a mark of the high regard in which VW enthusiasts hold them.

For Andrew, the Mk8 Golf's lukewarm reception reminds him of his early days in business, when a significant portion of customers viewed the Mk3 as a retrograde step over the Mk2.

'I think the Mk8 had benefits over the Mk7.5 facelift dynamically, but they tended to be ignored because of all the negatives surrounding the infotainment,' he notes, referencing oddly unintuitive control logic (that he thinks was sometimes exaggerated), not to mention occasional full system crashes.

He preferred his own Mk8 Clubsport over the Mk7.5 Golf GTI TCR model (basically equivalent to a Mk7 Clubsport), finding its steering crisper and the entire car simply more capable. Besides, he notes, the glitchy infotainment appears to be remedied for 2023-on cars, possibly because of the enforced pause over semiconductor chips giving VW time to start afresh.

'I bought my 21-plate car brand new and drove it out of the dealership with a warning on the dashboard about the parking sensors not working,' he says. 'But I'm getting 23-plate cars now and they're just perfect.' (Our Mk8.5 has a new, improved system of its own.)

And my Clubsport? 'They've definitely made some steps to make it more hardcore [compared with the TCR], which has taken away some of the usability but made the car more rewarding to drive. But the suspension can be quite crashy, even in Comfort mode.'

The two cars are not exactly like-for-like, a closer successor being the new Clubsport Edition 50, which adds more power and specific chassis tuning. It's also the first hot Golf to declare a Nürburgring lap since the Clubsport S. Its 7min 46sec is only three seconds faster than the 2016 Clubsport S with the same driver and over the same 12.9-mile layout. Almost a decade on, the original remains a very special car.

Andrew Chapple: GTI magician

They could talk all day about GTIs (and they did)

Chasing the CULT of MACHINE
"FUTURE" RIDER
x

Stellantis bits have been given a thorough Alfa makeover

Hello

ALFA ROMEO JUNIOR **MONTH 1**

Just out of reach

Every Alfa balances on the brink of brilliance. Will our hot Junior be one of the greats? By **Ben Whitworth**

The story so far

Time to find out if the Veloce lives up to its dynamic promise

+ Feels agile; superb looks

- Firm ride; cramped in the back; cheap-feeling cabin

Logbook

Price £42,295 (£48,595 as tested) **Performance** 54kWh battery, e-motor, 276bhp, 254lb ft, 5.9sec 0-62mph, 124mph **Efficiency** 3.8 miles per kWh (official), 2.6 miles per kWh (tested) **Range** 207 miles (official), 140 (tested) **Energy cost** 4.2p per mile **Miles this month** 1001 **Total miles** 1001

Few mainstream marques inspire such enduring fanaticism as Alfa Romeo. Eternally teetering on the cusp of greatness, the Italian underdog's fortunes have historically soared and plummeted with a regularity that would make an aerobatic pilot reach for the sickbag.

Sitting beneath the vast Stellantis umbrella hasn't quite waved the magic wand. Alfa's Tonale-fuelled 2023 resurgence showed real potential, but 2024 showed that the Tonale alone couldn't make up for waning interest in the ageing Giulia and Stelvio. So the Poland-built Junior, which arrived at the end of 2024 after a last-minute name change from Milano, means Alfa's first EV will really be doing everyone a favour if it's a hit.

The Junior's currently available not only as an EV but also as a hybrid, the Ibrida, priced from £28,400. The electric version, the Elettrica, comes in three flavours, the hottest of which is the Veloce, and that's what we have.

The Junior performance flagship is a spicy opportunity for us to temporarily join the Alfisti and immerse ourselves over the next six months in the long-held hope that Alfa Romeo will soon shine with the incandescence we all secretly believe it deserves.

It's priced at a punchy £42,295, and £48,595 as tested once its optional Arese Grey paintwork with blacked-out roof is added (£700), along with a Sports pack that adds a pair of

alcantara-clad Sabelt seats, sports pedals and kick plates (£2200), electric sunroof (£1200) and a Technology pack (£2200) that adds all manner of useful driver aids.

It's underpinned by the modular Stellantis e-CMP2 architecture – the same platform used by the Jeep Avenger, Fiat 600e and Vauxhall Mokka – with a 54kWh battery juicing a single electric motor that drives the front wheels through a limited-slip differential. That's a first among the electric vehicles in the Stellantis family.

That battery sounds a touch on the small side but the pay-off is a relatively modest 1560kg kerbweight, and with its outputs of 276bhp and 255lb ft of torque the Veloce will hit 62mph in 5.9 seconds, with strong overtaking punch and a 124mph top speed.

It sits on almost comically large 20-inch 'telephone dial' alloys wrapped in Michelin Pilot Sport 225/40 R20 tyres and housing vast 380mm solid front disc brakes gripped by four-piston monobloc calipers. There's very quick steering, with a 14.6:1 ratio for just 2.6 turns between locks, and significantly uprated springs and dampers compared to other members of the Junior line-up. Cast your memory back to 2002 and there's more than a whiff of the 147 GTA here. *Eccellente*…

There's no let-up on the sporting front when you step inside. Those Sabelt seats are very snug and supportive in all the right places, and there are plenty of visual reminders that this is no ordinary electric crossover: the compact three-spoke steering wheel, the alloy-capped pedals, the Dynamic-Normal-Advanced Efficiency drive selector, the cowled digital instruments, and the multitude of Alfa motifs…

> **I'm loving its unerring dynamic focus. Drive it like a stolen hot hatch and the Veloce is a hoot**

Early days, but so far I'm absolutely loving its unerring dynamic focus. Drive it like a stolen hot hatch and the Veloce is a hoot. That slippy diff and vast rubber let you hook the Alfa into, through and out of the tightest of corners at the silliest of speeds. It's like understeer and tyre-scrabble haven't been invented. It flicks from one direction to the other with a tail-up alertness completely at odds with its hushed drivetrain, the steering wheel constantly wriggling and writhing in your hands as it handles all that torque. It's a car that makes the driver feel alive.

Unfortunately the not so great stuff is just as pronounced. That uprated suspension may be brilliant at keeping body control tightly in check, but the upshot is an aggressively stiff and uncompromising ride quality. Over anything other than glass-smooth roads – nope, none around here either – the Alfa fidgets, thumps and jolts over intrusions with a fierceness that will have passengers, particularly those in the back, cursing loud and often. And a compact battery may do wonders for low-weight agility, but indulging in that performance has seen economy drop to 2.6 miles per kWh for a paltry 140-mile range.

Will the Veloce's winning combination of looks and pace mark it out as one of the first in a new generation of EV hot hatches? Will we get used to the 140-mile real-world range, or find a way to stretch it? And will that ride quality come to overshadow the Junior's other dynamic qualities? The next six months will provide definitive answers to those questions.

Poor road surfaces don't show the Junior at its best

Lee Brimble

POLESTAR 4 MONTH 3

‘Dial 2 for Polestar’

Polestar seems caught between science fiction dreams of a virtual future and a more conventional reality. By **Curtis Moldrich**

The story so far

Polestar exits Volvo’s shadow
+ Fantastic design; supercar speed; some cutting-edge tech
- Software niggles; ADAS issues

Logbook

Price £66,990 (£75,290 as tested) **Performance** 94kWh battery, two e-motors, 536bhp, 506lb ft, 3.7sec 0-62mph, 124mph **Efficiency** 2.9-3.3 miles per kWh (official), 3.3 (tested) **Range** 367 miles (official), 342 miles (tested) **Energy cost** 11.5p per mile **Miles this month** 255 **Total miles** 2229

An incident involving some garden shears and poor spatial awareness meant that the Polestar 4 had to return to the mothership. On the plus side, that meant I had a chance to experience for myself a bit more of what it’s like to be a Polestar driver.

After landing in the UK five years ago, Polestar’s laboratory-like ‘spaces’ – let’s try not to call them dealers – are becoming increasingly common: nine are now up, servicing and selling cars, growing to 17 in the next 18 months. My nearest Polestar space (not including the unit in Battersea power station) is in Maidstone, a short drive away.

Before taking a look, I already had an idea of what it’d be like: a Borg cube mixed with *Minority Report* tech and *Bladerunner* chic. (For non-sci-fi fans: cool.) So what would my first contact be like?

‘For Volvo please press 1, for Polestar please press 2’

Not so distinct, not so forward-thinking and a bit… deflating. Since its arrival Polestar has carved a space aside from Volvo with an entirely distinct aesthetic and outlook. Perhaps I’m being pedantic, but it seems a shame to pull that back down to earth with a single phone line.

Undeterred I make my way to the Polestar space, and things do get better. The Maidstone branch isn’t a monolithic ice cube like some of the bigger stores, but it does exhibit some of that Scandi cool – even in clammy Maidstone.

Existing in a totally different reality to the Triumph dealership across the road (or the Volvo one around the side), it has all the necessary elements of a car dealership but with an almost start-up edge.

A fleet of grey EVs are parked outside, while inside it’s clean and bright: there’s seating, Polestar merchandise and a configurator embedded in a table. The familiar dealership things are here too: there’s a coffee machine towards the back. It’s in this surreal ‘Kwik Fit meets the Death Star’ world that I leave my 4 for the next few days. It’s one of the few places it blends in.

I pull away in a Polestar 2, and after a few miles memories of my electric SUV are forgotten. Analogue, playful and athletic, the 2 seems to possess the best attributes of the 4, but without the hit-and-miss tech or the over complication. It’s not as ambitious, and in this trim nowhere near as quick, but it’s a significantly more engaging product.

Inside, the 2 is unambitious and somewhat conventional, but you still get a sprinkling of the Polestar aesthetic – only here it’s combined with a touch of the familiar. You get real buttons and switches on the wheel, and that means I’m confident and comfortable with the 2’s functions in three minutes, as opposed to 30 days.

When I arrive home, I’m reminded of another positive for the 2: it’s got a real key with real buttons. Innovation!

Polestar
Maidstone
TRIUMPH
LAGUNA
Polestar
OE25 UPJ
OY25 XXZ
OY75 WZB

A nice dealership. But a dealership

One fault: we failed to buy it

HONDA CIVIC TYPE R **MONTH 5**

Goodbye

Seize the day

If you can afford to buy a Civic Type R, buy a Civic Type R. By **Ben Miller**

The story so far

Arguably the finest hot hatch on sale

+ Sweet manual gearbox; the state of the front-wheel-drive art

- Gone too soon

Logbook

Price £51,905 (£52,605 as tested) **Performance** 1996cc turbocharged four-cylinder, 325bhp, 310lb ft, 5.5sec 0-62mph, 171mph **Efficiency** 34.3mpg (official), 33.9mpg (tested), 186g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 19.5p per mile **Miles this month** 2501 **Total miles** 5770

One moment it's yours – on the driveway, key in the drawer, ready to go – and then it isn't. No more flawless manual gearbox. No more outrageous stance and wheel cambers. No more bewitching composure under more than a little mid-corner duress. No more on-a-whim access to the best hot hatch money can buy.

Did anything break? You know that it didn't. Did it lose heaps of money? You be the judge of that. After six months and 6000 miles, the £52k Civic is worth around £42k. Do I wish I'd talked to Honda about buying it? No, I can't afford it. But if you can afford it, and if you can still find a car to buy – the Type R's end is nigh in Europe – then you really should consider it. The Porsche 911 GT3 of hot hatches, it is a very special car at a normal-ish car price. Do not dawdle.

Dan Baines – friend of the magazine, sales executive at TOP 555 and man of taste (a Renault Sport Megane R26.R sits in his garage) – didn't dawdle. Over to Dan.

'The plan was to go from two cars – a BMW M140i and the R26.R – to one, and the shortlist was effectively the Honda or an Alpine A110,' he says. 'I love the Alpine, but I don't know that it feels special enough for the money. I also wasn't completely comfortable with the idea of an A110 being my daily driver. And every review you read, every YouTube film you watch, nobody's ever got a bad word to say about the Civic Type R. My wife's CR-V also just hit 110,000 miles without any issues, and there's undoubtedly an appeal to Japanese engineering.

'But it was driving the Honda that decided it for me. I drove it on the same stretch of road on which I'd driven the Alpine, and I had more fun in the Honda. That's what it's all about for me. The steering feel struck me immediately – steering feel like a Porsche Cayman GT4 – and the gearbox is brilliant.

'And I guess because I'm familiar with front-wheel drive, because of the Megane, it just felt so right. You show it an apex and then just hold your nerve – there's so much grip and poise to the chassis. The brakes, too, are lovely.

'I was on holiday when I called the dealer, and there were only about 10 white cars left in the country then. So I went for it – in white, obviously. The image divides opinion, certainly, but it's a proper hot hatch: fun, but with space and practicality. The other day me and my wife took my son to scouts, for a camp, so we had all his camping gear in the car, too – you can't do that in an Alpine A110. I've had an annoying rattle or two, and the engine sounds a little flat until you fit an uprated air intake, but it's a brilliant, brilliant car. I love it.'

The good news: £42k buys a 6000-miler, perhaps even this 6000-miler. Carpe diem.

Count the cost

Price new £52,605 **Value now** £41,200 **Cost per mile** 19.5p per mile **Cost per mile including depreciation** £2.17

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T&C's: This competition is open to UK residents aged 18 and over. The prize draw opens twice - midday on Tuesday 30th September 2025 until midnight on Tuesday 14th October 2025 during the longlist voting phase, and reopens midday on Friday 31st October 2025 until midnight on Sunday 16th November 2025 during the shortlist voting phase. Entries from both the longlist and shortlist phases of the voting will be eligible. Whilst you may vote more than once, you will only be allowed one entry into the prize draw. The prize includes one pair of tickets to the 2026 TV Choice Awards taking place at The London Hilton on Park Lane on Monday 2nd February 2026 and one night's accommodation in a standard twin room at The London Hilton on Park Lane on a bed & breakfast basis. Both attendees must be over the age of 18 at the time of the event. ID may be required as proof of age as alcohol may be served at the event. The winners will have access to the awards ceremony, dinner and after-party. Travel to and from the venue and any other food and drink is not included. The winner will be the first name drawn at random after the closing date. The winner will be notified by email within 10 days of the closing date and has 10 days to respond before an alternative winner is chosen. This prize may be offered in a limited number of other promotions. No purchase is necessary, to enter for free visit www.tvchoicemagazine.co.uk/vote. Full terms and conditions can be found at www.bauerlegal.co.uk/competition-terms.html

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Our road testers rank the best cars currently available in 12 categories, and highlight the ones to buy

The Good, the Bad & the Ugly: The Top 5s

TOP 5 HOT HATCHES

It's the most argued-over category: all five are fab

1

TOYOTA GR YARIS

THE GOOD: A modern-day rally homologation special that's thrilling to drive

THE BAD: Road noise like a death-metal gig; joke rear seats

THE UGLY: Long waiting list, even with some versions now over £60k, although it starts at £46,045

THE ONE TO BUY: Now has optional auto but go for the manual

2

GIANT TEST WINNER

HONDA CIVIC TYPE R

THE GOOD: Feel, feedback, focus: a phenomenal car

THE BAD: £51,905 for a front-drive hatch with barely any more power than before

THE UGLY: Honda says it's the last of its kind; good job it's one of the best

THE ONE TO BUY: Keep it basic; Ultimate Edition for £58k is just cosmetic upgrades

3

VW GOLF R

THE GOOD: Superb Mk8.5 update makes this a seriously good and usefully quick all-rounder

THE BAD: Pity the Mk8 wasn't that already

THE UGLY: Still not quite there with the infotainment

THE ONE TO BUY: Estate is about £1.5k more than the hatch and more practical but not so sharp

4

AUDI RS3

THE GOOD: Want a five-cylinder hot hatch? Your choice is RS3 with four doors or RS3 with five doors

THE BAD: Now £60k; small boot for both

THE UGLY: RS is still better, but S3 does a lot for less money and is impressive in its own right

THE ONE TO BUY: £60,105 for the hatch; an extra grand for the saloon

5

VW GOLF GTI CLUBSPORT

THE GOOD: Rare mix of supreme comfort, hatchback versatility and cornering bite

THE BAD: The stats don't really shine in a 2025 context

THE UGLY: Mk8.5 a definite improvement, but interface still offers plenty to gripe about

THE ONE TO BUY: £42,155 for a very good Golf is pretty decent value

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TOP 5 SPORTS CARS

Still proudly displaying exhaust pipes

1

PORSCHE 911

THE GOOD: Exquisite blend of power, accuracy, excitement, style and usability, and GTS version integrates hybrid beautifully

THE BAD: You have to look down to #3 in this category to see the affordable performance Porsche; the most basic 911 is now priced in six figures in the UK, at £103,700

THE UGLY: It keeps getting bigger and heavier

THE ONE TO BUY: That basic Carrera is ace, and it's hard to imagine you'll regret it for a minute. But if you want more power and more trickery then Porsche has plenty of ways to take more of your money

2

ARIEL ATOM

THE GOOD:
A beautiful object as well as a thrilling drive; think of it as a modernised Lotus Seven crossed with a high-end sportsbike

THE BAD: You'll need bike-style wet-weather gear if it's raining. And at least £40k – this is an expensive toy, if a captivating one

THE UGLY: The 4R is even more bonkers

THE ONE TO BUY:
Do you really need the 350bhp optional power upgrade?

3

GIANT TEST WINNER

PORSCHE 718 CAYMAN/BOXSTER

THE GOOD:
Sublime handling with usability. Happily, it's been left alone while the EV and (just confirmed) new combustion models are developed

THE BAD: Less characterful than A110

THE UGLY: Flat-four versions sound like a VW Beetle in a duet with Eeyore

THE ONE TO BUY:
GT4 RS the most thrilling, Spyder is ace, but flat-six GTS 4.0 is a cut-price GT4

4

LOTUS EMIRA

THE GOOD:
The first new combustion Lotus in years is fantastically well resolved. Usable, desirable and thrilling

THE BAD: Harder work to live with than a Cayman

THE UGLY: The last petrol Lotus, at least for now – just as the firm gets the bucks to build on its brilliance

THE ONE TO BUY:
Line-up now consists of Turbo, Turbo SE (both with AMG four-cylinder) and Toyota-engined V6

5

ALPINE A110

GIANT TEST WINNER

THE GOOD: The perfect antidote to a world of excess; a modern classic in every sense

THE BAD: Two boots, neither big, and not much oddment storage inside

THE UGLY: R is 34kg lighter, which can't have been easy, but also more than £90k. Too much

THE ONE TO BUY:
A110 S adds handling poise for £68,170 but £55,160 base A110 is all you need; enjoy it before it goes electric

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TOP 5 GRAND TOURERS

FERRARI ROMA

THE GOOD: Style, speed and sensuous lines; classic ideas adapted for 2025

THE BAD: If only the roads had classic emptiness

THE UGLY: Baffling steering-wheel touchpads; strangled exhaust note

THE ONE TO BUY: The cabrio. Arguably even more beautiful to look at from outside

BENTLEY CONTINENTAL GT

THE GOOD: Luxury, power, agility and a great-looking body

THE BAD: Nope, it's really sorted

THE UGLY: Just because it's always been heavy and thirsty won't stop us complaining that it's heavy and thirsty

THE ONE TO BUY: Plug-in hybrid range-topper is the most powerful Bentley ever, and so much more besides

FERRARI 12CILINDRI

THE GOOD: Wonderful performance; full of feel; looks and sounds great, even on a rainy day

THE BAD: It's awfully wide; some of the cabin tech is fiddly, although Ferrari seems to be over the worst

THE UGLY: Just the price

THE ONE TO BUY: £339,245 for the coupe; £366,500 for the Spider

PORSCHE TAYCAN CROSS TURISMO

THE GOOD: Raised ride height absolutely monsters lumpy UK roads

THE BAD: Not actually that practical

THE UGLY: Audi's e-Tron GT gets the nicer cockpit

THE ONE TO BUY: Completely out of vogue, and struggles to hold its used value, so the prices – up to £165k– seem steep

ASTON MARTIN VANQUISH

THE GOOD: Easy to enjoy; glorious cabin; comfortable ride quality

THE BAD: Just that bit too heavy and brutish for some tastes

THE UGLY: CarPlay Ultra feels like a dubious addition

THE ONE TO BUY: £330,000 for the coupe, or about another £30k for the rather fine Volante

TOP 5 COUPES AND CABRIOS

BMW M2

THE GOOD: The longitudinal-engined two-door BMW coupe lives

THE BAD: Bigger and heavier than we'd like but outrageous fun

THE UGLY: You need £68,795 to get involved; steering can feel a shade rubbery

THE ONE TO BUY: Manual or auto transmission options – get the knob. We'd go M carbon seats, too

MASERATI MC20

THE GOOD: A no-excuses excellent Maserati. Handling and ride to match the looks; a GT as well as a sports car

THE BAD: Throttle could be sharper in normal mode

THE UGLY: Convincing your mates you did mean to buy the Maser and not the 296

THE ONE TO BUY: The droptop Cielo. All the coupe's go with added style

ASTON MARTIN VANTAGE ROADSTER

THE GOOD: Glorious V8 engine, wonderful body, superb handling

THE BAD: Boot shrinks compared to the coupe

THE UGLY: Cabin is better than before, but at this price you'd want it to be Bentley standard

THE ONE TO BUY: £175,000 for the Roadster is about £10k more than the hardtop

MERCEDES-AMG SL

THE GOOD: This generation was developed by AMG but it's still a cruiser, and very good too

THE BAD: Engines are still better than the ride and handling

THE UGLY: Cabin designed by touchpad scattergun

THE ONE TO BUY: The £153k, 469bhp SL55; also look at the coupe cousin, the AMG GT

MAZDA MX-5

THE GOOD: Closest thing to a modern-day Lotus Elan; genius folds-flat-in-seconds roof

THE BAD: Lashings of bodyroll; the 1.5 can't climb hills

THE UGLY: If you're over 6ft tall you might not fit, especially in the metal-roofed RF

THE ONE TO BUY: 1.5 starts at £28k, 2.0 in Homura spec brings LSD for £35,515

PCM (per calendar month) figures are typical prices for PCP (personal contract purchase) deals available at the time of writing. For guidance only

TOP 5 SUPERCARS

FERRARI F80

THE GOOD: Ferrari's fastest, cleverest, most polished circuit car yet, a once-in-a-decade masterclass

THE BAD: That phenomenal performance can seem a bit much for road use

THE UGLY: €3.5 million may be academic but it's still a lot

THE ONE TO BUY: All 799 have been sold, so good luck with that

FERRARI 296 GTB

THE GOOD: Timeless styling and a driving experience as good as any of Maranello's finest

THE BAD: You need reflexes like a fighter pilot to drive it as fast as it can go

THE UGLY: Touch-sensitive steering-wheel pads make the interface borderline unusable

THE ONE TO BUY: Fiorano pack is £25k+ overkill. GTS adds sunshine

PORSCHE 911 GT3 RS

THE GOOD: Spine-tingling sound; 9000rpm redline; total immersion

THE BAD: Nothing to see here

THE UGLY: Getting on the waiting list is like winning both *The X Factor* and *The Apprentice*

THE ONE TO BUY: RS is somehow more focused than the GT3 but more road-compliant at the same time. How do they do it?

LAMBORGHINI REVUELTO

THE GOOD: The monstrous, naturally-aspirated V12 lives on – now e-boosted and wrapped in such a hard-to-crash package insurance should be a tenner. Vastly improved cabin, too

THE BAD: Price has skyrocketed over the Aventador

THE UGLY: EV-only range is six miles

THE ONE TO BUY: There is only one

MCLAREN 750S

THE GOOD: Lighter, more powerful, better: evolution of 720S is another corker from Woking

THE BAD: 30 per cent new but you'd struggle to tell

THE UGLY: Convincing your mates you actually bought the new car

THE ONE TO BUY: Stick to the comfort-spec seats and avoid the harnesses on the top 'super carbon' ones

TOP 5 PLUG-IN HYBRIDS

BMW X5 50E

THE GOOD: Massive 67-mile official e-range; horizon-eating performance

THE BAD: Hybrid hardware cuts into boot space to the tune of 150 litres; no seven-seat option

THE UGLY: Like the 3-series, the X5 has always escaped the worst of whatever bizarreness BMW's designers devise

THE ONE TO BUY: This one, for £82k; it will serve you well

FORD KUGA

THE GOOD: Current version has better efficiency than before, and it still drives very well

THE BAD: Electric-only range isn't great, although fuel consumption's good

THE UGLY: Interior is dowdy next to Ford's Explorer

THE ONE TO BUY: PHEV in ST-Line X trim can be had for £42,565, and there's currently a zero per cent finance offer

PORSCHE CAYENNE

THE GOOD: Handling; driver focus; choice of body styles; 0-62mph in 5.0sec

THE BAD: Bigger battery now but still can't match the X5

THE UGLY: The touchscreen for the front passenger: £1000 and surely not needed

THE ONE TO BUY: If you value the U in SUV, avoid the coupe – even if it is a great steer

VOLKSWAGEN TIGUAN

THE GOOD: Mk3 is bigger than ever but still a neat all-round package. Choice of 201 and 268bhp PHEVs, both with 62-mile e-range

THE BAD: Room for improvement with the infotainment

THE UGLY: People are buying Tiguans instead of Golfs, in huge numbers

THE ONE TO BUY: Go for either of the eHybrids in good-value Match trim

GIANT TEST WINNER
5

BMW 330E

THE GOOD: Goes sub-six to 62mph and up to 41 electric miles on a charge

THE BAD: Engine is slightly coarse; plain 330i is less heavy, more fun

THE UGLY: Hybrid kit eats into boot space, so regular 3s are roomier

THE ONE TO BUY: Choice of saloon or estate. Handsome, vaguely affordable 330e Sport Touring is £48,985

TOP 5 ELECTRIC CARS

Such a friendly presence on the roads

1

RENAULT 4

THE GOOD: All the joyfulness and fun of the 5, but now with added practicality… just like the old 4

THE BAD: Some minor annoyance with the fiddly drive selector

THE UGLY: Where the 5 is a sensationally adept modern recreation of the look and feel of the original, the new 4 is a bit generic to look at

THE ONE TO BUY: Prices start at £26,995, which is very hard to argue with. Mechanically just the one version for now, but a healthy amount of choice, trim and options

2

RENAULT 5 E-TECH

THE GOOD: The way it looks, the way it drives, the pricing – but it's also practical, with five doors, a usable rear bench, and good efficiency

THE BAD: New R5-based Nissan Micra is, objectively, at least as good. So why do you still want this?

THE UGLY: What ugly? Look at it

THE ONE TO BUY: Entry point is £21,495 but we'd splash out on mid-spec Techno and the bigger battery

3

HYUNDAI IONIQ 5 N

THE GOOD: Electric and exciting – synthetic drive modes and gearchange are game-changers

THE BAD: Breadth of configurability takes getting used to. Ignore that it's software-driven – it feels real

THE UGLY: Interior quality below par for a £65k car

THE ONE TO BUY: Just one model; paint and a sunroof the only options – all the drive modes are included

4

PORSCHE TAYCAN

THE GOOD: Totally overhauled but still fast, responsive and fluid; now more efficient

THE BAD: Info screen in front of the passenger is faintly ridiculous

THE UGLY: Prices are all up, and be aware of poor demand for used Taycans

THE ONE TO BUY: Priced from £88,200 for the rear-drive basic Taycan; you can pay a lot more and get a bit more performance

5

KIA EV3

THE GOOD: Roomy and clever interior; great value for such long range; funky looks – it's a shrunken EV9 or EV6

THE BAD: Air trim feels cheap inside, but only when compared to bigger Kia EVs

THE UGLY: That weird climate-control screen

THE ONE TO BUY: The 270-mile-range car is brilliant value but most will want the longer-range option. GT-Line is our pick for value-to-comfort goodness

PCM (per calendar month) figures are typical prices for PCP (personal contract purchase) deals available at the time of writing. For guidance only

TOP 5 SUVS/CROSSOVERS

New rivals coming from Germany? Good luck with that...

1

LAND ROVER DEFENDER

THE GOOD: Reboot is an phenomenon, bringing dynamic improvements wherever you drive

THE BAD: Second-row access is a pain in the 90; expensive; 130 in particular is very big, so parking can be tricky

THE UGLY: Very nice inside, so you're wary of getting it muddy

THE ONE TO BUY: Range spans 90, 110 and 130 bodies, with significantly different dimensions but remarkably similar character and the genuine off-road ability that Land Rover always delivers so convincingly. Heart says Octa or petrol V8 90, head/wallet say diesel-six D250 110

2

ASTON MARTIN DBX 707

THE GOOD: More power and other treats make the new S range-topper a brilliant road car, with the interior improvements debuted on the 707 and gaining Apple CarPlay Ultra

THE BAD: Thirsty, and the odd lurchy gearshift

THE UGLY: Options quickly inflate the price

THE ONE TO BUY: The S and 707 both start at £210k

3

PORSCHE MACAN

THE GOOD: The new one is electric – and as impressive as the outgoing combustion version

THE BAD: As family transport it has flaws, especially boot space

THE UGLY: Don't want EV? You'll need to be quick (or wait for the planned return of engines)

THE ONE TO BUY: EV starts at £68,500 and rises to £96,900 for the Turbo; £71,200 4 offers all you could sensibly want

4

MERCEDES G-CLASS

THE GOOD: Rejigged range spans diesel, petrol, AMG and EV, and they're all good: agile off-road, smooth and comfy on-road

THE BAD: It's all a bit fancy; how do you feel about muddy wellies?

THE UGLY: Merc's premium mission means it's a posh version or nothing

THE ONE TO BUY: Electric is astonishingly good, but expensive at £154,870 (although the AMG's more)

5

FORD RANGER

GIANT TEST WINNER

THE GOOD: New PHEV removes any doubt: this is a great pick-up – good to drive and good value

THE BAD: Electric-only range isn't huge; load space is trimmed a little by the hybrid hardware

THE UGLY: It's a big, heavy car if you're only using it for shopping

THE ONE TO BUY: Top-spec Stormtrak trim brings useful extra features, for £59,760

TOP 5 LUXURY CARS

RANGE ROVER

THE GOOD: Masterful and hugely desirable. An EV version will turn up soon-ish

THE BAD: Doubts about reliability won't go away. It's heavy even before it goes EV

THE UGLY: The D350 mild-hybrid straight-six diesel is sublime. Can you live with the guilt?

THE ONE TO BUY: The above (from £108,775), though the V8 is fun

ROLLS-ROYCE PHANTOM

THE GOOD: Money-no-object pinnacle of serenity and craftsmanship

THE BAD: Is this really you? And is this really appropriate in 2025?

THE UGLY: It's all a bit oligarchy

THE ONE TO BUY: It's 'standard' or long-wheelbase, from £380k. All cars are built to order, so many owners pay much more

BENTLEY FLYING SPUR

THE GOOD: Now a hybrid V8, the Spur has great performance and poise plus decent e-range

THE BAD: Other VW Group cars get even smarter chassis tech

THE UGLY: Lots of emphasis on expensive options, so brace your credit card

THE ONE TO BUY: Go for the Speed, from £226,500

MERCEDES S-CLASS

THE GOOD: Tech-fest with timeless waftability. Few cars are more calming

THE BAD: Surprisingly unrefined petrol six; doesn't ride as well as it should

THE UGLY: Trying not to crash while using the Hyperscreen

THE ONE TO BUY: Hybrid 580e works best: £119,370 in entry AMG Line Premium trim

ROLLS-ROYCE SPECTRE

THE GOOD: A joy to drive, and exquisitely built

THE BAD: Efficiency not great

THE UGLY: Fabulous detailing and engineering will benefit so few

THE ONE TO BUY: Black Badge version keeps what's good about the regular Spectre but adds an extra level of dynamism. Also, of course, a bit more expense

TOP 5 FAMILY CARS

BMW 3-SERIES

THE GOOD: On-the-deck driving position; dreamy handling balance; slick interior; 50 years on, a brilliant car to drive and live with

THE BAD: Knowing you've made the obvious choice

THE UGLY: You'll need an M340i or M340d for six cylinders

THE ONE TO BUY: 330e if you want a hybrid; 320i if you're on a budget

BMW 5-SERIES

THE GOOD: Much has changed; still great. Handling defines the class

THE BAD: It's now a very hefty car

THE UGLY: Is nowhere safe? Even the tradition-embracing 5-series gets a full EV option in the form of the i5

THE ONE TO BUY: Prices start at £53,185 for the 520i but can easily exceed £80k (and the M5's well into six figures)

DACIA JOGGER

THE GOOD: Seven seats; massive boot with the rear row removed; prices start at £18,970

THE BAD: Sandero base means it's a bit narrow; spartan

THE UGLY: Low Euro NCAP score, although it's pretty safe in a crash

THE ONE TO BUY: Hybrid usefully punchier than petrol, but much clunkier. PCP deals are very tempting

VOLKSWAGEN ID. 7

THE GOOD: The most coherent ID to date now in a choice of hatch and estate. Not posh, but highly agreeable

THE BAD: Frumpy styling and that still sub-par interface

THE UGLY: So few electric estates to choose from

THE ONE TO BUY: Pro Match with 77kWh battery does the job just fine, priced from £51,005 for the hatch

AUDI A6 E-TRON

THE GOOD: Electric saloon and estate is refined, quick and pretty sharp, with a typically smart cabin, decent range and quick charging

THE BAD: Rear passenger room isn't great

THE UGLY: Audi's constant model name changes are just confusing

THE ONE TO BUY: Go for the £70,740 rear-wheel-drive A6 e-Tron Performance

TOP 5 FAMILY HATCHES

BMW 1-SERIES

THE GOOD: Premium and practical, and a lot more normal than the original 1-series

THE BAD: Actually a bit too normal for some tastes

THE UGLY: Facelift has dialled down the ugly, thankfully

THE ONE TO BUY: £32,290 mild-hybrid front-drive 120 and £44,925 all-wheel-drive 296bhp M135 have now been joined by 123 xDrive; all good

PEUGEOT 208

THE GOOD: Style; big-car character; knockout interior; EV version available

THE BAD: So-so handling; a squash for adult rear-seat passengers

THE UGLY: Dumping the wheel in your lap like a TV dinner to see the dials clearly

THE ONE TO BUY: From £20,245, but £27,045 GT is worth saving up for. Bright colour is best

MINI COUNTRYMAN

THE GOOD: Wonderful interior and all-round feelgood factor from the big five-door

THE BAD: You need to be in the mood for the built-in zaniness

THE UGLY: Options can send the price into the stratosphere

THE ONE TO BUY: Your basic Countryman C Classic is just fine at £29,100

VOLKSWAGEN GOLF

THE GOOD: Brain-out default choice still a solid all-rounder; ride, visibility, roominess

THE BAD: Seat Leon a very similar package for a lower price

THE UGLY: Revised Mk8.5 version just a bit better, especially the infotainment

THE ONE TO BUY: 1.5 TSI 150 Match at £28,715; roomy estate is also great value

FIAT GRANDE PANDA

THE GOOD: Remarkably roomy, keenly priced, charming and useful

THE BAD: Not the sharpest or quickest

THE UGLY: Everything looks a little plain next to a Renault 5

THE ONE TO BUY: Hybrid version starts at a keen £18,035, but EV entry price of £21k is appealing too

TOP 5 SPORTS SALOONS

BMW M3

THE GOOD: Mighty straight-six; front axle's never-give-up attitude; dreamy chassis balance

THE BAD: No manual; nearly 911 money now

THE UGLY: M3 Touring £91,865; saloon is £89,635– both quite steep

THE ONE TO BUY: The CS, if you were lucky enough to bag one of the 100 brought here. Used Touring is a good secondhand buy

MERCEDES-AMG S63

THE GOOD: V8 plus e-motor shows AMG can do a great performance hybrid, and in the most unlikely of places: a huge luxury saloon

THE BAD: Boot size suffers, and ride quality isn't perfect

THE UGLY: It's a pity this approach wasn't applied to the latest C63

THE ONE TO BUY: Two versions, both £193,525, one with more black trim

BMW M5

THE GOOD: Very rapid, ridiculously agile and refreshingly low on emissions; a clever reboot in PHEV form

THE BAD: Lots of modes, and an odd amount of wind noise; more divisive than previous M5s

THE UGLY: Heavy and expensive, so it's not *that* clever

THE ONE TO BUY: £113,605 for the Touring; £2k less for the saloon

ALFA GIULIA QUADRIFOGLIO

THE GOOD: Charisma in spades, rarity value, fantastic agility and almost as good as a BMW M3 to drive

THE BAD: Emphasis on *almost* as good as an M3 to drive

THE UGLY: Flaky interior quality; infotainment still lags behind the best

THE ONE TO BUY: There's just the one, wonderful, model from £86,885

GIANT TEST WINNER
5

PORSCHE PANAMERA

THE GOOD: New version builds on success of the very fine model it replaces

THE BAD: Barely a saloon – four-up is okay, but forget five

THE UGLY: Estate version is no longer available, even though it was the best looker

THE ONE TO BUY: £89,400 gets you in; Turbo E-Hybrid at £151,500 now tops the range

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– Paul, August 2025

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NEW TAVASCAN
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CUPRA
CUP 12A

For the daring few. The new CUPRA Tavascan is here to redefine performance with its bold, unconventional design and state-of-the-art technology. Our first all-electric SUV coupé, crafted for those who defy the ordinary.

Maximum range on a full charge for a CUPRA Tavascan is 298.3 - 342.9 miles (official test WLTP figures) depending on the trim. Official fuel consumption for the Tavascan mpg (litres/100km) combined: N/A. Combined CO_2 emissions: 0g/km. Test data obtained under standardised conditions after the battery had been fully charged (to 100%). The Tavascan is a battery electric vehicle requiring mains electricity for charging. Figures shown are for comparability purposes and may vary by trim. Only compare fuel consumption, CO_2 and electric range figures with other vehicles tested to the same technical procedures. These figures may not reflect real life driving results, which will depend upon a number of factors including the starting charge of the battery, accessories fitted (post-registration), variations in weather, driving styles, route conditions, speed, vehicle and battery age and vehicle load. Zero emissions while driving. Data correct at September 2025.